Concurrent Earths

Gail Brown

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Acknowledgements

Dreaming science fiction was something that happened soon after reading my first science fiction book. For years, I wanted to write some. I once had a novel started, although, I never finished and lost the story decade ago.

A tremendous thank you to all who offer help that often you never see the results of. Years later, even decades later, those you help, will remember the assistance you gave.

May this novel assist others on their search for hope and acceptance in world often not designed for them.

Introduction to Concurrent Earths

Explore worlds, not quite as you know them. Alternative Earths, or human-like beings on other planets. Other times, history has changed. A forgotten past. An unreached future. A dream of places that may, or may not, be.

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Other Worlds and Other Worldly

Guinea Pigs

Pamila lifted her right leg and pushed it on the chair.

Mike pushed the boot onto her foot. He lowered her leg while dragging the boot leg up to the waist of the suit. He scowled. "The real astronauts can pull the boot on themselves."

"Sometimes. Not always. They all need help standing up after they pull it on." Pamila tugged at her suit.

Mike placed the bar in front of her that she'd hold on to in order to pull herself into a standing position. He'd have to help her fasten the suit together, and finally slip the heavy gloves on.

She wouldn't be able to do anything for herself. Whether she was in the suit, or not. It only made it worse. The water tight suit was heavy. So heavy, she couldn't lift her hands from her sides. At least for now. Soon, it would give her freedom for six to eight hours. Freedom she had long forgotten. Once she slipped into the pool which mimicked zero gravity, she would be able to move again. To move in ways she could only dream of on the surface.

Doctor Tren walked into the warm swimming pool arena. He called it something more. She had forgotten what. The technical terms couldn't find a place to stick, and be remembered.

"You haven't used any pain medication in the previous month?"

He asked that every day. "No sir."

"When did you last use pain medication?" He asked this everyday too.

Pamila fought to remember. "Before I left high school. Over a bunch of years ago." The more accurate word for bunch was missing too. Too many missing words.

Mike pulled the table with her helmet toward her. "I don't understand why the government wants to send you and your disabled friends to space. At least, we won't have to support you once you are there."

There. The space station orbiting Mars. With low to no gravity. A place she could breathe without her lungs fighting her.

"I've tried to explain it to you."

Mike rubbed his arm. "I'll be glad to not have to help you and your friends anymore. You'll lose weight out there, living on the few vegetables you can grow in zero gravity."

"I hope so. Though not all of us are overweight. Only a few of us. From the medications we took." Her brain fuzzed. It wouldn't do any good to explain. If she could. Mike didn't care.

"Excuses." He shoved the helmet on her head harder than necessary.

Doctor Tren glared at Mike.

Many people thought the weight, and pain were excuses. They had all been fit and healthy once. Like Mike, some of them had even said those same words. Now, they know the truth. No amount of dieting, or exercising would take the physical pain away. Or allow them to breathe easily again. Only zero gravity did.

"Go on. Final trial date. Coran and Jilly will join you in a few minutes." Doctor Tren clicked his stopwatch.

Mike held out his hand.

She grasped his arm with both hands, leaned the combined weight of her obese body, and the expensive 350-pound suit against his rail thin frame. The frame that had been considered ideal for space exploration.

He helped her onto the platform which would lower her into the water.

Pamila slipped feet first into the water. Her full body ached as she slipped deeper. Her feet no longer felt like anchors rooting her to the spot. Relief flowed up her legs. Then her waist relaxed. Before long, she'd be able to breathe with less pain. And move her arms. Something she couldn't easily do, even without the suit on.

Pain ebbed away as she walked a few steps on the bottom of the pool. She lifted her arms. As high as the suit would allow. Above her head. Something she hadn't been able to do on land for longer than she could remember.

Mike had joined her underwater. He held up his hand and the measuring device.

With a nod, Pamila began the measurement procedure. Almost identical to the one she had finished an hour before Mike and his associates had assisted her in putting the suit on. Except for one major difference. Her range of motion had nearly doubled. In an environment with less gravity than on land. It would increase more before she left the pool.

She wasn't the only person. Coran and Jilly had passed this test. Along with a few dozen other people. Not quite legally people

anymore. The government no longer considered them people due to their disabilities. Especially those with motor disabilities.

She was half way through the measurement process. Even with these experiments, it wasn't enough to prove that they were functioning people inside bodies that couldn't move according to normal expectations. Many of them needed wheelchairs on land. Those in the government couldn't understand. They were all to ready to be rid of them. Guinea pigs. Sent to space to live. The government, and many others believed they would fail. Somehow, they'd prove them wrong.

The fog lifted as her pain decreased. Forward. She could now walk, and relax. Move her legs on her own. All kinds of motions she couldn't normally do. Not on land.

Mike took the final measurement and ascended to the surface. That word. She had remembered the word ascended. One of the millions she had long forgotten. Here, and in a few other preparation chambers, she had been able to regain the memory and abilities which she had lost over a decade before to chronic pain.

Coran and Jilly finished up their movement measurements and would join her soon. They'd all have a six to eight-hour reprieve from high pain. It wouldn't be gone. Only tolerable. At a level that would incapacitate normally healthy people.

Pamila walked toward the mimicked space station. She had read the directions before she put her suit on. She read them again on the waterproof board. They made more sense now. To repair a broken piece of metal, and extract some debris. Without damaging her suit.

The camera people followed her. They could speak to her through the helmet in an emergency. Mostly, their communication was between them and all the other technical staff.

If she passed today, it would be a few more weeks before she, Jilly, and Coran would be shipped off to Mars. Their goal was to build a space station for those who could not walk in Earth's gravity. They could float, and be productive. A few real astronauts would join them, to help build a colony on Mars. This colony would be for people who could not physically function on Earth.

They were seen as expendable. If anything went wrong, no one would know until the next supply ship arrived.

A memory of the day their lives turned around popped in her head as she neared the mock space station.

Doctor Tren had appeared at a chronic pain management meeting. He told them he believed they could live healthy, happy lives on Mars. And other zero, or low gravity locations. However, the government would not authorize his research, unless, he termed it as a way to be rid of them. He played the part admirably. In front of the cameras. In private, he reminded them of how their contributions could save humanity. He chose the most scientifically trained for this first mission. Other skills would be needed in later missions. Some were prepared to training in the next few weeks.

She, Jilly, and Coran would be the initial attempt at low gravity living. For life. Government leaders didn't expect them to survive. No one knew what the results might be for their health. They could all die without access to Earth's healthcare system. After all, it would take more than a year to reach Mars by the fastest spacecraft currently available.

Or. They could live. And thrive. In a way they couldn't do back home.

Those who were healthy on Earth, might not thrive in the low gravity of a space station, or on Mars. The astronauts with them would be tested with that in mind.

Jilly arrived beside her.

Pamila handed the metal bar to her.

Words didn't need to be spoken aloud, although they could use the helmet's communication system. Words were whispered each night in the privacy of the dorm where they lived. Both had wanted to be astronauts since they were born. Both had gone to college and begun science programs. Then. Their health failed. They had lost much of the ability to walk. Talking became difficult. Working was impossible. Even reading and comprehending a short story was almost more than they could manage.

Coran had faced similar issues. He had trained to be a doctor. He'd be the first full time doctor in space. The doctors on Earth expected he'd fail. After all, he could barely spell his own name when on land. When underwater, and the pain had lessened, he could remember everything he had learned in medical school. Of course, he had failed in his final years, after he couldn't function ten

plus hours a day during the resident training program of a local hospital.

On land, Coran hobbled from his dorm room to the restroom. Now, he danced across the bottom of the pool toward them. His own project for the day had been completed. He bounded up to them. He held up one finger to say he was doing fine. Then, he bounced on to the access to the space station mock up.

Pamila continued working. If Mars didn't work for them, then, maybe ocean colonies would. Would a colony floating on the ocean be accessible to family? Or build floating homes under the water. They could live in bubbles low enough that the passing of ships wouldn't damage them. Or bubbles under the rocky continental shelves. Safe from the storms that ravaged land. Not deep enough to where the pressure increased. The ocean would be a frontier life they could adjust to.

It didn't matter to her. She would go to Mars to live out her life. No matter how long that might be. She'd be pain free soon. Able to walk without her wheelchair.

What those outside their tiny circle believed was a death sentence, would prove to be a chance at life that otherwise could never happen on Earth. Pain free. Functioning. Able to walk, talk, think, live, and physically do everything they wanted to do.

If the people at home wanted them, they could remain on Earth. Healthy people could provide opportunities for them. Make life accessible. Instead, they chose to block every option. They called those who lived in pain lazy, and worse, for not being able to fit into the pain-free mold.

Perhaps, someday, those who stayed on Earth now, would have the same issues when they did arrive on Mars. It'd be interesting, to watch them stumble and fall, if they couldn't learn to navigate in low gravity atmospheres. It was physics after all. Healthy people tended to use much more force in movement. Those who lived in pain, used less force, to prevent injury. They also concentrated on the effects of their movements before doing them. It was a different thought process, and way of living.

Mars. The step to the stars. The initial step to survive as the sun begins its decline. The life-giving sun will expand to reach, and engulf the remains of Earth. A step for those who can live in alternate densities and environments. One step that may prove that

those who are different, and unwelcome on Earth, may be the ones who can survive elsewhere.

Guinea pigs. They were the guinea pigs for the future. The hope of humankind, even if those who were healthy had not admitted it. Pamila lifted her head. It was something to be proud of. A legacy for her daughter who may someday join her on Mars.

The camera crew motioned to her. Her eight hours of relief was over. She began the trek back to the stand that would lift her out of the water, back to the land of pain, and forgotten words.

For only a few more days.

Isolation Worlds

Lights blared for takeoff.

Ryan glanced out the window.

Earth pulled away from him.

His introductory trip to the Isolation Planets. Though isolated, they weren't planets at all. They were renamed, reinvented, terraformed moons of Jupiter and Saturn.

Much as Earth had been reinvented. The original home of humans was almost free from nuclear winter and safe to live on again.

The whine decreased as the spaceship leveled out.

"First destination is Military Planet." Parker touched another control.

"Why is it included in the Isolation Planets? Shouldn't they be held in high esteem?"

Parker turned a knob on the control panel. "The choice of those who set up the planet trip order. Military Planet is the first, and last destination on the supply trip. They keep us informed, and provide back up if there are problems on the darker planets."

Ryan unbuckled his seat belt. It would be a long trip. Plenty of time to catch up on history. He passed the isolation cells. Each locked room held at least one prisoner from one of the distant homesteaded planets, on their way to a permanent isolation planet. Few, if any, would ever return home.

He glanced at the cards. Two sex offenders, three thieves, and two druggies. How did this even happen anymore? The endless wars and destruction should have turned everyone away from crime. However, it seemed to escalate instead of decrease.

Lights blinked.

"Military Planet." Parker adjusted a control switch.

In an hour, they had docked at an open building.

People of all ages, genders, and from several different planets gathered in the waiting area.

Parker handed out boxed supplies. "Any news?"

A grizzled old man stepped forward for a bag of tree leaves. "Nope. Usual chaos. A druggie wants to go home. Will you take him?"

Parker lifted another box. "What do you think?"

The man rubbed his chin. "I know this one. Send him to Petty. He might be ready next trip."

"Can you tell me about him?" Ryan leaned forward.

"Sure. Carry these leaves for me." The old man set the box down. He strolled across the crowded room.

His age didn't show in his legs.

Ryan gathered the boxes, and followed to the rooms where the man lived.

The man pointed to a corner to place the box. "I miss sleeping in leaf beds while in the wars. I almost miss them. Travel, sights, and laughter in between the battles. I don't miss the battles, only the new places I hadn't seen."

Ryan waited. The man would speak about the druggie when ready.

The old man pulled up a quilt. "Delren was my son. He has a child. The mother was a druggie too. They left their child with my wife on Forest Planet when they were sent to Druggie. They could have chosen otherwise. They didn't. I hope he is ready to go home."

"Is your wife here?"

The man laughed. "This is no place for a child. Or, a wife. She is happy. She sends me leaves, and letters. Go, or Parker may leave without you."

"I'll be back."

"Bring news of my son."

Days passed. Two Isolation Planets to visit before Druggie. These space ports weren't at all open, or friendly. Nothing like Military Planet. No peace here.

Locked door stood behind locked door. A third set of locked doors before they even reached the platform where the workers who could leave were located.

"Three requesting departure." The man in a military uniform blocked the locked doors.

Parker nodded. "Ryan here will interview Delren. I'll interview the other two."

The man pointed his gun at Ryan. He pointed the gun toward an open door.

Ryan stepped inside. Instead of a nice pleasant room with a bed and window, like on Military Planet, the room was tiny, dark, with only a blanket crumpled on the floor.

The tiny thin man who sat on the blanket looked up as Ryan walked in.

"Your story?"

"I didn't want to go to war like my father. I took the only way out. It's war here too. My body is dying. I want to go home and see my mother, and child one last time."

"You know about your child?"

"Yes. Though not the gender. The child's mother died a month ago in my arms. She begged me to go back. Please take me."

The man didn't look like much.

Parker stepped into the open doorway. "Hurry Ryan. We have to go. If they find out we are here, they'll rush in and try to take the ship."

The man closed his eyes. "I promised her I would try to go home."

"You may go with us to Petty."

"Hurry." Parker stalked off.

Ryan held out his hand. "We must go. Are you ready?"

The skeletal figure rose. "I know you'll make me take my clothes off and check for drugs and such."

Ryan closed his eyes. That part of this potential job he didn't want to do. If it was too bad, he could always change his mind, and become a forester. Not a farmer, or a city builder.

As Ryan and Delren entered the spaceship, Parker pushed out two young women into the waiting arms of the gun totting men.

The women staggered behind the men to the set of locked gates.

The skeletal man toppled into a seat. "I remember being led into Druggie. Not many leave."

Parker pulled the spaceship out of port.

"What's it like there?"

Delren smiled. "Fun. For a while. All the drugs you can grow and use. Then, it gets boring. We miss what we gave up. Even if we were whole, we could not go back and have a future."

"I thought that was story, not real."

Delren's eyes lit up. "Oh, it's real. Those two women will be unable to bear children within the hour. Any pregnancy they have, may be aborted, since they don't appear pregnant."

Ryan's mouth dropped. "Why did they give up so much?"

"Who knows? For me, I didn't want to go to war. For women, it varies. Many also have family or friends on other isolation planets, usually Offender." Delren's eyes closed and he slept.

"True." Parker stepped toward the docking area. "It was hoped Druggie would be the first Isolation Planet to no longer be needed. It seems they are all needed. I hoped to retire twenty years ago, with no one doing this job now."

Months passed as they dropped by planets and left prisoners, and supplies. Their final supply destination would be Murder Planet. Even more dangerous and devious than Druggies. Druggies could be stopped by doors. Murderers, not often.

Ryan held on as they docked at the satellite orbiting Murder.

"Push that control." Parker pointed. "It'll take all the oxygen out of the dump room."

Ryan pushed the button. The screens showed no people in the room. A paper fluttered on the floor.

They waited ten minutes to be sure any escapee would die before pushing the button to dump supplies into the empty room. Ryan and Parker then pushed the drugged and bound murderers onto a platform that would float down to the floor as soon as they closed the door.

"How long will they be locked in there?"

"An hour. They'll live. Oxygen will flood the room once the ship is detached.

"Close off oxygen supplies to the drop bay."

Ryan turned off the oxygen to the tiny capsule that would drift down to land on the lowered supplies.

Radio signals crackled.

"Parker here."

"Stopping back by Petty?"

"Yes. Delren will be our drop off. He has gained weight and health since leaving Druggie."

"Fine. Theo will be going with you to Forest. He has changed his name to Lindon."

Parker nodded. "What was his crime?"

"Petty theft on City. Something about a blanket painted to look like trees."

Parker laughed. "Be ready for the swap in the morning."

Delren sighed. "I hoped to see my father on Military at least."

"Unlikely. Do you think he wants to see you?" Parker held his hand on the radio switch.

Delren lowered his head. "No. I was his shame. His oldest child."

"I think he did want to see you." Ryan touched the radio dial. "Can we take him there before his father dies?"

"You're soft. You'll be hardened like me once a murderer sneaks on board."

"I hope one never does."

"Petty?"

"Yes."

"We'll take Lindon, and keep Delren. He may be with us on the next fly by."

Lindon's arrival was quiet. He chose a back storeroom to sleep in.

Months passed before they arrived at Military Planet.

The only person waiting for them was the old man with a handful of leaves.

Lindon and Delren walked up to him. "Father."

"My sons. May you have peace and know one another." The man handed them both a handful of tree leaves. He slumped to the ground and breathed his final breath.

Peanut Butter and Jelly

Grimel touched down on Earth.

He pointed the taser at his legs. He closed his eyes, and pulled the trigger. For a short time, he'd hide his four-legged body under the two-legged guise of a red-blooded human. Not his favorite mission. Few others would dare. Humans had been known to bump into their invisible front legs, and run screaming. Those bumps often caused serious injuries.

The forest he had landed beside echoed with wildlife. The language transmitter would allow him to recognize and understand the babble of most of the creatures, except for one species of moth.

Across a field devoid of life, other than a creepy tall vegetation, loomed a dead home where a human lived alone.

Grimel walked away from the chatter of the forest into the silence of the dead grass. His front feet searched for safe passage, while his hands pushed the grains back into place. The ancestors of this grass had once had a voice, softer than the trees. Now, they made no sound, not even a rustle in the breeze. Or, as he brushed against them.

His front feet clattered onto a deadwood porch. The silence overwhelmed him. Humans were said to prefer to live in dead homes, frequently killing whole forests to build a few dead places.

Grimel touched the voiceless rail, and didn't quite trust it. Creatures that lived in the wood it had been made of, would have been poisonous to him, if the tree were still alive.

He turned his body at a painful angle to knock on the door as he had seen people do in the videos he had watched for this mission. Face to face with the dead tree held in place by metal straps, he could almost hear its death screams.

"Be right there!" A man opened the door with a squeak. "How can I help you?"

"I'm lost and need to rest."

The man grunted. "Lost souls always find their way here. Can't a man have any peace and quiet?"

Grimel shivered. Sound was welcoming, not silence. Silence and being alone like this man, would kill him in hours.

The man opened the door further. "Come on in."

Grimel followed the man, careful to close the door.

The man sat at a table. He swirled a cup of dark liquid in his hands. "You hungry?"

Nothing in the videos that humans ate appeared appetizing. All dead, like their homes. Couldn't compromise the mission. "Sure."

"There's food in the cabinet there." The man's eyes peered over the rim of the cup as he swirled it. He swallowed the liquid in a single gulp.

Mission at stake, he had to try to eat human food. "Which cabinet?" His voice squeaked, much higher than an adult human male normally reached.

"The one over the sink." The man set his cup down.

Too little sound in this dead place distracted Grimel's thoughts. If the man was busy chatting with others, he could check his database to verify he understood what "sink" meant.

He walked to one dead tree box, caressed the opening, and pulled it toward him. Inside were plastic and glass bound containers. He had seen them in the videos.

He pulled out one and looked at it.

"Don't you know what to do with a bread box? Are you some kind of tree hugger?"

He pushed the unappetizing plastic away. Grimel stepped back to the table. His front legs went under the table too far, and brushed something living. He pulled back. "Do you enjoy living alone?"

The man nodded. "It's peaceful and quiet. I can meditate. Since you left the bread out, I'll make a sandwich." He pushed the chair back. At the counter, he pulled out two more glass containers.

Not knowing what a sandwich was, Grimel walked over to observe him. After all, learning human ways was part of his mission.

The man pulled a small dead tree box out. He grabbed a dead tree limb out of a pile. He opened the plastic box, and pulled out two odd shaped flat things.

They kinda looked like toys children played with, though they were far too flimsy.

The man twisted open a glass jar, and pushed the dead twig inside. When he pulled it out, it was covered in red, the known color of human blood. "Fresh strawberries I picked myself."

Grimel shivered. This man ate his own kind's blood. Scary.

The man glanced from his work to Grimel. "Do you like strawberry jelly?"

He couldn't respond. The word strawberry wasn't one he recognized.

The man smiled. He turned back to the next glass container and opened it. He jabbed the stick in. It returned covered in a semi-solid brown which looked like Grimel's blood.

Grimel stepped back.

The man smeared the "blood" on the second slab, and slapped them together. Then he raised it to his mouth and took a bite.

That was enough! Grimel ran from the house and didn't care that all four feet clattered down the steps. There was no way he was going back. Someone else would have to find the escaped convict who had taken cover on Earth.

His superiors would expect him to report on what he had seen. Could he remember it? Grimel paused at the edge of the field as he removed his human costume with his taser.

A sandwich.

What was it?

Could he show his superiors how to make it?

Two slabs of dead grains hidden in plastic.

Human blood from a jar smeared with a twig onto a slab.

The convict's blood from another jar smeared onto the other slab.

Slapped together, and a bite swallowed.

He shivered and nearly fell. Even with all four legs firmly on the ground.

The sight of such a thing, he hoped to never see again.

Planet Loreia in Gamma Zaria

Kara slowed the spaceship in orbit around Planet Loreia. Loreia was the destination for those who needed a break from the mental stress of daily life, as if there were many of those these days. Or was it cycles? The cycle on a ship was different from a planet surface. Any planet.

She clicked the comm. "Arrived at Loreia. One week on the surface. I'll be waiting." Kara sighed and leaned back. A week of silence.

Sheldon walked onto the bridge. "Coming with us? It would be good for you. Not up here, all alone." He tilted his head to the side and watched her.

Kara closed her eyes. Of age. Alone. Grieving the distance, and likely death of all of her family. No one would be surprised if she didn't go to the planet's surface. However, a week alone in total silence, except for computer beeps, was an even worse prospect. Alone with her thoughts, fears, and dreams. Adrift alone in the ether over a world she had not stepped foot on, or breathed the air of. "I'll go."

No more words needed to be said. Sheldon turned, and left her to her thoughts.

Loreia. Where people communicated through telepathy and sign language. She wouldn't be able to hide her thoughts and fears. Too late.

Sheldon and his team of scientists hurried off to explore Loreia's ancient artifacts. Their research hoped to find a link between the inhabitants once spoken past, and their current communication style. It was an interesting combination of telepathy, sign language, and a few verbal words used with children. More complicated than Kara believed she could manage. It was hoped this would help scientists communicate with people who had lost, or never had, spoken language.

A few hours later, Kara examined artifacts in the host's display cabinet.

Their host, Fendallyn, looked at her expectantly. "Need?"

She sensed a tickle in her ear. Or perhaps, the edge of her brain. "Maybe a stroll. Is there a garden near here?" It would be

refreshing to have fresh vegetables after months in space. Hydroponics wasn't the same as sun and rain grown vegetables.

Fendallyn held out both hands. "Come."

She waved him on. His words were few and far between. Although, on Earth, the lack of words would be a sign to be watchful, and fearful, it was normal here. These people spoke few words. Mainly to foreigners, and small children.

They strolled around a garden with flowers and plants she didn't recognize from her limited studies of this planet. She stooped to touch one which resembled a rose. Like the yellow rose left in her best friend's hand before she was buried only a few months ago. That rose had bloomed much as her friend had. Once, for a short, sweet time, she had been a mother to a newborn infant. All taken away by an unexpected illness, that the doctors had not recognized, and even now, couldn't name. Perhaps it had been a dormant virus picked up on the asteroid they had explored days before.

Kara held her hand out over the bloom, without touching it, and closed her eyes. The beauty and strength of the flower flowed to her hand, through her skin, to her brain. A beauty beyond words. A strength in times of fear. That beauty could reach her, and pull her heart out of the fear, to rise and continue on.

Something rather like a tickle in her brain pulled her out of her memories. The tickle scampered around the edges of her thoughts and feelings, before it scampered back out. If she were on any other planet, she'd assume it was electricity from the flower. A natural occurrence.

Fendallyn could be testing her. Or trying to read her mind. She opened her eyes and looked around for him.

He was an arm's length away, watching the flower. At least, to a less observant person. There was an energy about him. One which was different from the people she knew.

"Fendallyn?"

He opened his eyes. The extra ridge above his eyebrows raised almost to his dark hair. "You a researcher to?"

"No. Were you trying to read my thoughts?"

He shook his head. "No. Determine if you can transmit like we do."

"Transmit?"

"Thoughts. Pictures. Feelings. Structure."

"You think I can?" Kara pulled her hands back away from the rose. He seemed sincere.

Fendallyn nodded. "Think so."

"I don't want you reading my mind. I don't want to read other people's minds."

He laughed. "Not like that. More like your spaceship comm. Have to be close, or intend."

"Really." Kara tilted her head. "What was I thinking."

Fendallyn pointed to the rose and held his hand over it like she had. "Listened to the flower."

Yes. That was what she had done. Listened to the flower speak to balm her pain. It too had spoken without words.

He pointed toward a bench.

They sat amidst the many growing and flowering plants. "Some of you speak without words."

Kara hesitated and closed off bits of memory. Fendallyn must never see those forgotten memories. True. In intense relationships, or other circumstances, humans spoke without words. "You use sign language."

"As do you sometimes."

"Only those who are deaf, or deafblind."

"No. More. You don't realize it."

The tickling sensation began again. This time, she sensed more than saw hand motions, independent of words. Their meanings could be many, and depended on the words that went with them.

"You sent me images."

"Yes. Try to send one back."

"How?"

Fendallyn held out his hand. "Hold your hand over mine as if it were the flower."

She looked at him.

"I won't hurt you."

Kara held out her hand and closed her eyes. Energy raced through her fingertips. She pulled back a little. Questions formed in her mind.

"Do many people talk vocally here?"

"Few. To young children, or when visitors arrive. Several generations ago, we had quit altogether. Now, we try to revive spoken words."

"Do people enjoy talking aloud?"

"No. It's considered rude in public. Anyone might hear your words. That may not change."

Kara laughed. So opposite of humans. "Do you understand my thoughts?"

"Some. Your experiences are quite different. Lots of pain, I can tell. We listen for the word pictures you want us to hear. It would be rude to delve deeper. We do check for emotions of someone when we are introduced."

"No matter what?"

He smiled. "As long as you don't commit a crime, you are safe. Then, the examiners have the right to delve deeper."

Of course, that made sense. She pulled her hand away. Exhaustion overwhelmed her.

"Speaking like us is tiring when you begin learning. Few are able."

He led her back to his home, his hands a body width away. No touching, no spoken words, simply a gentle leading energy emanated from his mind.

It was simple to communicate that way. Her mind reached out to sense what was around her. A sense of peace.

Days passed as she practiced with Fendallyn. It became easier to communicate. They were soon able to transmit without having to be close to each other. A relief to Kara.

They could sit on the bench and transmit their thoughts and feelings. Fendallyn soon began to transit their culture's history to her. It was far more beautiful in pictures, thoughts, and feelings than words printed on a screen.

"Do they ever change?" Could the pictures be altered as they passed through collective generations? It was a concern. Almost as much as altered written words. The meaning of words, written and spoken, altered over time. Would a picture?

"Our communication has limitations. Some plants and animals have not been seen since the speaking days, and we don't have names for them. Only memory pictures. We aren't sure if the

pictures are corrupt, or if they died out." Fendallyn looked out over the garden. "What your team is doing may help us understand that foggy past. We don't know what happened. Most of our spoken language is forgotten."

"That's not good. Sheldon will be back soon."

"No one else who has visited us has accustomed themselves to our way of communicating as well as you have."

Kara lowered her head. It was a unique and easy way to communicate. A one step process, not multi-step like seeing, feeling, thinking, and organizing before the words would arrive on her lips. She had accepted their style easily. Would she be able to communicate with Sheldon when he returned?

"What are you thinking?"

Kara glanced at Fendallyn. "Don't you know?"

"No. We learn as small children that when the thoughts move, we pause listening. Until we know the person wants us to hear again."

"How do I learn that?"

He laughed. "We can go to a public place where there are many people."

"I've hardly seen anyone since Sheldon left."

"You haven't spoken aloud in several cycles. You need to, before you forget how."

Kara laughed.

Fendallyn held his hand out. "We'll go."

They strolled through the town to a restaurant on the river bank. Another beautiful place she wished there were time to explore.

She expected to hear the cacophony of other voices in her head, as if they were whispering. Although there was a dull roar, it could have as easily been the river outside.

Fendallyn laughed. "You won't hear them unless they want you to. By age seven, most children have learned to block out unwanted intrusions."

"Must make parenting fun."

"I'm sure it does."

The waitress walked over to their table and handed them menus.

Kara scrolled the pages on the menu. She had learned some of the names of the dishes here. The picture of one looked like a fish meal.

Fendallyn transmitted a picture of a fish swimming in a stream. Then the picture of the dish that the restaurant served.

The waitress returned.

Kara opened her mind for the transmission.

The waitress displayed her surprise.

Fendallyn laughed. "She can transmit."

"Go ahead."

Kara's fingers shook as she skimmed the pictures to choose what she wanted to order. She pulled the memory of the picture of the dish Fendallyn had shared moments before.

"Good choice." The waitress took Fendallyn's order and collected their menus.

He ordered a similar dish. At least, the transmitted picture was similar. It could've been anything.

"Did you transmit to the waitress so she would know to return to the table?"

"Yes. Waitresses carry a device which enhances transmissions. It only transmits a return picture. Some customers are turned off completely."

"Wow. Hope that doesn't happen to me."

"Unlikely. A customer has to be extremely unruly for that to happen."

As they waited on their meal, Kara and Fendallyn transmitted thoughts and feelings about societal expectations and rules of conduct. There were many to remember.

After the last bite of fish and fresh vegetables, Fendallyn transmitted a picture of kids playing. "Do you want to go?"

"Why?"

"A way to practice. People lower their blocks down there, and you can practice blocking. Or listening."

"Okay." Kara pushed her chair back. "Payment?"

"The waitress has already accounted for the meal. It goes on my account."

"I don't want people to think we are on a date."

Fendallyn laughed. "You are a traveling dignitary here. Romances are arranged different."

"Okay."

Fendallyn led the way, sorta. They ambled side by side, with the transmitting energy the only thing between them. They passed a few houses, and down to a playground by the river's edge.

Children played chase. Others climbed on various objects centered in the open field. A few splashed in the nearby river.

Adults sat on tree limbs. Some talked. Others watched the children. It appeared as if no one noticed their arrival.

Many of the children were young. Young enough to both speak aloud, and project their transmissions.

Kara had to step back, the confusion was overwhelming here. A child ran beside her while speaking, and transmitting at the same time. Completely opposing thoughts and words, to different people.

Fendallyn touched her shoulder. "We'll sit on the tree over there."

They sat on a tree away from the other adults.

"How can they transmit to multiple people?"

"Energy connects parent to child. They develop blocks around age seven. Then, there is some connection for years. The distance a parent and child can transmit to each other is far greater than between two people who aren't related. Generally, over an entire house."

"What about couples?"

"They can transmit at a closer distance. Sometimes between rooms. Not always. Depends on the closeness of the relationship."

"I want to go closer again."

"Be careful. I'll stay here."

Kara stepped forward. The transmissions from Fendallyn faded, though not completely out. A few more steps, and she was close to a group of women sewing nearby.

Their transmissions were open. She could see the pictures. Children, sewed items, maybe clothes, and other trinkets they communicated about. She held the pictures of children in her mind, and glanced toward the play area. Several of the transmitted children were there. Was the person transmitting the mother to the specific child, or a conversation about the children in general?

She walked over to them. Would they expect her to speak aloud, or in pictures? Kara didn't want to scare them. They could block her if they wanted to. She spoke aloud. "Hi."

They glanced up.

Kara closed her eyes and transmitted a few thoughts to the group. "Learning to transmit. Help me?"

The women looked at each other.

Their confusion felt like pins and needles sticking her brain. They had no idea what she had heard or seen in their transmissions. Now, they replayed what they had shared to verify if anything important had been sent.

"How well do you transmit?" A woman transmitted to her. It was partially garbled by the background of children and other women.

"I ordered my meal today."

"How can we help you?" another woman asked. "Seems as if you are doing fine."

Kara closed her eyes. The picture Fendallyn had sent her of blocked minds arose. Somehow, she had to be sure she transmitted it correctly. Incorrectly had a different, almost vulgar, meaning.

One of the women pointed to a stump near them. "Join us. Listen to the children. You'll learn. You've been here how long?"

Kara glanced back through her memory. A week. Or maybe two. She had lost track of time.

It was a tiring afternoon. She listened and practiced blocking, as well as transmitting to multiple people at once. Not as easy as it sounded. Soon it seemed more natural to her than speaking aloud.

A young boy crashed on the ground near them. "Home."

Kara understood his transmission. "Who is your mom?" She sent back.

He stared at her flat forehead and backed away.

One of the younger women laughed. "I'm his sister." She then put up the block and transmitted directly to the boy.

The block felt like a cover which rolled over the images she transmitted. Although, a tiny glimmer of them peeked through. Then, the woman lowered the block. "Some blocks are light, and allow images through, others are similar to a slap. You don't want to experience those."

Kara nodded. "I was feeling it, trying to understand it. How it works, why, and much more."

"We know. Children here do that. Eventually, they stop. Maybe you can help us."

"Fendallyn asked me to. I don't quite understand how I can."

"You'll find a way. He is waiting on you."

"I better go back. My research team should be back today." Kara transmitted the thought of happiness, and a picture of a flower.

Fendallyn waited for her beyond where she had left him. "I thought it was time to return for you."

"You left?" She had reached easy transmitting distance.

"I had a few things to take care of. They would have found me if you needed me."

"I didn't feel you leave."

"I was outside of transmitting range." Fendallyn glanced at her as they strolled along the street.

"Are you sure? I know you helped me." Kara struggled with the realization. She had been alone, without the only person who knew who she was here on Planet Loreia. His presence had continued to feel as if he were by her side. Sheldon and the team didn't count, as they couldn't transmit thought and picture. Or communicate with non researchers.

They reached his home and went inside.

Sheldon waited for them. "Kara, are you ready to go back to the ship?" His voice boomed and echoed off the walls.

She covered her ears. Had spoken always felt like that? Did the children here speak softer? That was why Fendallyn had taken her to the playground. "Not ready."

Fendallyn laughed. "You can't transmit to him."

She turned to him.

Sheldon had a confused look on his face, and shuffled his feet.

"Sorry Sheldon." Her voice cracked. "I want to stay a while longer. You'll need to update the databases before we can leave anyway."

He stared at her. "We'll go back to the ship. I'll check back in the morning." He turned and walked out the door.

Kara giggled.

Fendallyn walked toward the kitchen. "You could always stay here."

Kara stood straight. "Here? I've imposed on you long enough." Her mind swirled as she attempted to block his thoughts to separate hers from his. As she did, she realized, she didn't want to

block her thoughts from him. Some part of her kept reopening the block.

"You've integrated here. At most, I believed you'd be able to read a few transmissions, not nearly all. Almost as if you belong here." Fendallyn returned with warm drinks.

"Belong? I've never belonged anywhere." Kara sipped her drink. "There's a lot to consider. Not sure I want to stay anywhere long."

"Where is the longest you've stayed somewhere?"

Kara closed her eyes. Memories washed past, like a flowing river. She didn't even try to block Fendallyn from seeing them. All her memories. One ship, the Clam, she had lived on for over a year with her mother while young. Even then, they had visited dozens of planets. None of them had meant anything.

Fendallyn's memories reached out to hers. His whisper of emotion asked her to consider how she would feel if she left here today. She pulled back. Sheldon had been close to her. Their ship was home. Or had been for a few months. Going back to it didn't seem right. It wouldn't be easy to return to speaking, now that she could communicate this way. It was much easier to relay information without all those extra steps to create sound and words.

"You don't have to decide today." Fendallyn's words floated across her mind. They drifted further away.

She opened her eyes.

He wasn't there beside her.

She set her drink down and stepped out into the garden.

He sat on a bench waiting.

Deep down, Kara knew he had spoken from there. Not beside her. They had bonded. The bond could be broken. If she chose to. Either by returning to the spoken universe, or choosing to live with another person, here on Loreia.

She walked up to him and offered him her hand.

He had taught her how to reach herself. How to reach others. Did he feel as she did?

Fendallyn touched the tips of her fingers. "Your choice. You can change your mind anytime. Ships will continue to visit to study our world. Few will stay."

"I'll stay. For now." She sat beside him. The silence of the night was beautiful, filled with transmissions between them. No words. Only precious, peaceful pictures tonight.

Solar Life

Sunlight peeked over the horizon.

Elanora pushed the woven grass curtain back. No need to call Traden or Shadel from onvine chatting with distant friends. The weather forecast for today was bright sunshine for a full eight hours. She tapped her final vine mail of the night.

The vine quivered as the message shifted off to a distant cousin on the next island. An island far enough away, this cousin would reply before she went outside for her daily sunnap.

"Ready." Shadel galloped up to Elanora. "Traden and I want to visit our friends. Can we sleep and absorb with them?"

Elanora patted the vine which connected them to all other living beings. Sprouts grew up too fast. Tiny seeds had sprouted into fast growing solar babies. No. Solar toddlers now. As the Earthmen would call them.

"Go on. The Earthmen will be here soon. I will watch you." Why did the Earthmen insist on visiting during napping and absorbing hours?

Shadel and Traden bounced off the various vines of their large tree covered home, and out into the sunlit valley. They wouldn't go far. Sunlight would make them dozy, and their friends would meet them halfway.

Elanora moved a few vines which had grown more than usual the day before. It didn't take much to keep their shaded area safe for working during the night.

She emerged into the open field. A nearby boulder was her favorite place to doze and absorb the sunlight. From there, she could listen to the whispering winds, and hear of storms before they arrived.

Shadel, a young tree, stood silently tall over the smaller Traden, a future flowering bush, next to the stream that ran across the valley. Soon, they would flower, and pass into the next phase of life. They might wilt, or merely doze, until the following spring.

Elanora yawned. The breeze stirred the leaflets on her arms. The bristles on them prickled of impending danger. She glanced around the clearing. No grazing animals.

Two humans, Jeremy and Egbern, approached.

She lowered the bristles on her leaves. Not much of a nap before they arrived. Elanora rattled herself awake. Maybe the Earthmen would fall asleep in the sun today. They had a few times during their visit. Five nap times interrupted. Too many interrupted naps would stunt the growth of Shadel and Traden.

"Hello Elanora," Jeremy stopped beside her. "Do you mind if I sit beside you today?"

"I don't. The grass will."

The man laughed. "Where would you recommend?"

"The boulder over there. No plants grow under, or around it."

Egbern touched a nearby rose bush. "Do all plants here talk?"

"Of course. Don't they on your planet?"

He pulled away. "Um. I don't think so. If they do, I don't know about it."

That explained much. These bumbling men tromped right across plants, and blocked vital sunlight from the smaller ones underneath as if they knew nothing of the living world.

She followed them over to the boulder.

A few blades of grass made room for her roots.

The men continued to talk and ask questions, while placing nonliving bits of former plants and animals in their mouths. As they did, she caught a whiff of a distant land that knew a different sun.

Ants crawled up Elanora's stem, eating the mites that had crawled out from under the rock to clamber across her body. The ants would have a little juice to sustain themselves. If they didn't bite her.

Elanora listened to the men talk. Strange words that had no meaning on Solar. They had shown her pictures. Tables, knives, forks, spoons, pans, stoves, beds, and many more that they had no need of. She couldn't even fathom what purpose they served. She dozed.

"This sun is scorching me. Wish you had a building with air conditioning we could go into." Jeremy covered his eyes.

"Why would you go inside? Then, the sun wouldn't fill you with energy. You'd curl up and wilt away without sunlight."

"Most people curl up to hide from the sun." Jeremy covered his arm. "My skin is burning on this hot rock. I'll go back to the ship."

"Go ahead." Egbern shifted to take up more space. "I'm okay here. For a few more minutes anyway."

Jeremy lifted water out of the brook to his mouth. "Don't be long."

"I won't." Egbern waited until Jeremy was out of sight. "We aren't all bad. Would you want to go to Earth with us?"

"I don't want to leave my family behind. I couldn't go without the sunlight during the journey. Without sunlight, I'd die. I doubt it would be a place I would be able to live. Not with buildings blocking the sunshine."

"I understand. We'll be going back in the morning. I believe it would be best to treat this planet as uninhabitable by humans, don't you?"

"What would humans do here?"

He leaned back and faced the sky with his eyes closed. "They'd take out most of the plant life, and plant rows and rows of the same thing. They'd try to control the weather, and the animals. They wouldn't hear the plants speaking. It wouldn't be nice for you."

"Doesn't sound nice." Elanora quivered. Here everyone was related. Even the animals, few as they were, lived as part of the community, with the plants.

"It's too hot here for people to be happy. We'll find another planet to expand to." Egbert pushed himself up. "Take care, and stay safe Elanora."

She watched him trudge away. Before he was out of the clearing, she climbed upon the rock. The warmth seeped into her stem, and up to every leaf. They unfurled fully to reach for the life-giving sunshine.

Dystopia

Evacuation Zone

A quiet afternoon. A moment of peace in a world where calm had been forgotten.

Nessie opened the local news app.

"World war is imminent. There doesn't appear to be a way to deflect it this time." The female newscaster pointed to an oil field on a map. The location was only a few hundred miles away. "The line has been drawn across the oil fields. How long it will go on, and its destruction is too much to predict at this time."

The newscaster droned on about the impending war before the recording cut off. The recording ended on the picture of the evacuation zone. Her home near the middle of it.

Nessie set her full coffee cup down.

Time to pack and leave. Friends had scattered far and wide. With families of their own to worry about. Family far away. Outside of the evacuation zone.

Nessie stood and walked to the window. The lone tree in her front yard danced in a gentle breeze. Limbs swayed. No leaves fell. Somehow, she'd find hope for her children. Donna and Toby should grow up safe, without fear, if she could find a safe place for them. Roads would soon be packed with slow moving cars of evacuating families.

A horse trotted around the tree in the front fenced in yard. Bayboy nickered and trotted up to the porch to pluck a slice of apple off of a chair.

Nessie smiled. Hope.

She grabbed a few clothes, a little food, and shoved it into a shoulder pack. Nessie opened the door to Donna's room.

The teen napped with her teddy bear curled up in her arms.

She touched her daughter's shoulder, and almost tucked the blanket in. "Donna, wake up. Hurry, we have to go."

Donna sat up. "Now?"

Nessie nodded. Tears threatened to make speech impossible.

Donna grabbed a packed bag beside the bed. She dropped her teddy bear inside.

"Where are we going?"

"We have to hook up Bayboy and Juney to the cart. They will take us outside the evacuation zone."

Nessie called for Toby.

Toby grabbed his bag, and dropped his electronics in. He wouldn't go anywhere without them.

Nessie and Donna hooked the horses up to the cart. Donna grabbed a crate of squeaking chickens and pushed them to the backboard before tying them in.

Donna crated the two barn cats she could find. The others were off hunting, and would have to be left behind. Tara, the stable dog, jumped up beside the cats.

Nessie tied their bags in beside the back seat of the wagon. With the motor vehicle roads packed, they'd be able to take trails the cars couldn't.

They climbed in. It would be a long ride beyond the edges of the evacuation zone.

"Where will we go?" Donna asked again.

"To your grandparent's home." Nessie urged the horses on.

Bayboy and Juney trotted down the busy road.

People and cars passed, almost unseeing as they rushed to pack a few belongings and leave. One sided phone conversations were shouted while people raced to and fro with items they believed they would need.

A neighbor stopped them. "Can you take my pony with you? Tie her to the cart if you have to."

"I'll ride her." Donna jumped out of the cart with Tara beside her.

They enjoyed the wind blowing in their hair, and lost count of the hours and the miles traveled. The houses and roads seemed to fly by. Soon the homes were further apart, with meadows and trees making perfect landscapes. They wouldn't be beautiful long inside the evacuation zone.

By evening, the horses had carried them to the farmhouse almost hidden behind a stone fence. They halted at the front door. A spray of gravel splashed against the doorframe.

"Who's there?" Mother opened the door.

"We are home."

"Come in." Mother reached for a bag.

"I'm ready. I have to take the chickens and cats to the barn. A neighbor gave a pony to me to keep safe."

"Is this everything?" Mother looked into the cart. "You may be here a while."

"Yes." They had travelled fast by brining few belongings.

Nessie untied the chickens. She lifted the crate over to her mother. "Are Katy and Daniel here?"

"Both are out gathering supplies. They'll be back soon." Mother held the door open. "Bayboy and Juney will be fine in the yard till they return."

Nessie gulped. Daniel. She had not been home to stay for any length of time since she and Daniel had been a couple. It had been at least fifteen years. He had married her sister.

She had married soon afterwards. Her husband had died a dozen years ago, two months after Toby was born.

Mother handed her a cup of tea. "Relax. You are home."

"Not sure it's a good idea."

"That battle was fought a long time ago. You are all past it now. Encourage the children grow up with, and trust, each other. They'll need a trustworthy family."

"We are too close to the evacuation zone. Too close." Nessie sipped her tea. There had to be a safer place.

"Where can we go? No country takes refugees in anymore. And they might separate us."

Nessie closed her eyes. All this fighting over oil. The compressed bones of the ancestors of today's living beings. It made no sense. The more fighting over it, the less there was for the purposes it was used for. Deformation of the Earth's crust from use had already damaged, or destroyed, many vital ecosystems.

The porch screen door opened. Daniel stepped in. "Saw Bayboy and Juney outside. I put them in the corral." He glanced over at the table at Nessie. His face turned red.

She waited. Her hand trembled.

"Glad you are here. Don't want to worry about you." He pulled out a chair and sat. "Will you stay?"

"You sure?"

He nodded. "This is your home too. And your children's. How are Donna and Toby?"

"Resting in the living room. I don't want them to worry."

Daniel laughed. "Oh, they'll worry. Katy will be here with Elle and Salena soon. She went shopping for supplies."

"That's good." Nessie closed her eyes a moment. Peace. Something that had been forgotten. Would her children know peace? The leaders of too many countries seemed intent on constant bloodshed. It was amazing any people were left alive as long as the wars had been going on. Today, it was on their front doorstep. A major oil field being battled over to drive the engines of war. After all of the oil was gone, would the war end?

Days passed. News reports weren't good. Father returned home with seeds, and a plow which didn't require fuel. Lots of different kinds of seeds.

"We need to plant as much as we can. Should have been planted a week ago." Father drank some water and glanced around the family table. "We will all have to work here. Leaving our homestead will have to be limited."

"What about work?" Katy asked.

"You are needed here more. Everyone is."

"And my job barely exists anymore." Daniel covered his eyes. "Always believed it would last forever."

The next day they prepared the soil to plant. A garden had been here many years before, when they were children. Half ornamental, or forgotten, by those who worked and didn't have time to collect the fruits of their labor. They planted beans, corn, squash, and more. It took a whole week to prepare and plant the garden. Each day, water was brought by bucket from a well several hundred feet away.

Each night, the news grew worse. The news showed pictures of the battle as it slipped and slid across the oil fields and towns in the evacuation zone. Drones captured pictures, and bits of conversations to share with the people outside. Reporters wouldn't dream of going in there with the fighting going on.

Drones captured photos of sick fighters. People coughed, and clutched their sides. Some collapsed on the fields with their weapons beside them. Drones gathered the weapons and the sick.

Father went out one night and returned with a small herd of cattle, and another of goats. "Wish I could have found a donkey or lama too."

"Where did you find these?" Nessie yawned in the predawn rays of light.

"A farmer who was dying asked me to take them. His herd dogs helped. They'll stay too." Father pointed at two large white dogs by the barn. They were stretched out panting as if they had returned from a long run.

"How bad is it out there?"

Father's eyes glazed. "Worse than the news says. Glad we are off the main roads, and away from most people."

The news reported which hospitals outside the evacuation zone had been placed in quarantine.

Too late.

Many people had been in for routine medical tests, and gone home. Delivery vehicles had carried products in and out of the new quarantined area.

Whatever the sickness was, it passed through neighborhoods and homes. People who contracted it didn't survive. For some, the incubation period was short, only a matter of hours. For others, it might be weeks. Nobody knew who had been exposed, and who hadn't.

Children died in their mother's arms. Parents succumbed to the illness while holding the bodies of deceased children.

Nobody knew if the disease was chemically induced, or a natural one, that had mutated beyond the ability of the remaining doctors to determine its origin.

The war was on their doorstep.

Panic spread. Homes and buildings were broken into. Many burned to the ground.

Children, dirty, and in ragged clothes, stumbled from shattered home, to broken home, searching for food and shelter.

The scenes the drones portrayed shocked Nessie and the family as they gathered around the computer. There had been no live reporters for a few days. They may not have survived either.

"We have the garden." Mother dusted the table clean.

"It'll feed us. If no one steals from it." Father glanced at the door.

It had been barred and locked tight inside. The garden was outside. Anything could happen at night, and they wouldn't know before morning.

Nessie, Donna, and Toby had moved to sleeping in the living room instead of the basement. Katy and Daniel's two girls, Elle and Salena, stayed with them, instead of in the attic.

Nessie shivered.

Donna and Toby huddled in the corners they had chosen to sleep in. As far away from her as they could be. They couldn't have the accustomed privacy of individual rooms.

Mother walked into the living room. "We'll need to go into town tomorrow."

"Is that safe?" Nessie arranged her bedding as comfortably on the floor as she could.

"No. Katy is concerned. With sick people not isolating themselves, we could bring illness home."

"Why take the danger?"

Mother glanced toward her bedroom. "We need supplies. Food till the garden produces, and other things that may not be available since factories are completely shut."

"Are you sure that's all?"

Mother lowered her eyes. "I'm about out of blood pressure medication. Katy is weaning me off it as safely as possible." She turned and plodded back to bed.

Medication.

Nessie tucked herself into her bedding.

No medication not being created anymore.

No pharmacists to dispense it.

No doctors to diagnose or treat illnesses.

The drones had reported which hospitals were full of dead and dying. With the nurses and doctors falling beside their patients. One drone had not found a single living person in an entire hospital. The photos of dead and decaying bodies were gruesome. No sign of rats, cats, dogs, or other animals attracted to the bodies left in the open meant they were deadly. Even the vultures ignored their bloated rotting corpses.

Nessie followed Donna and Katy through the big box store.

Items were knocked off shelves. Rats ran rampant in the grocery section. Food boxes had been broken open, and mice looked up at them as if they dared them to interrupt their eating.

Nessie grabbed Donna's hand. "We don't need to be here. Send Daniel and Father to this section."

"Better go choose a few clothes. At least two sizes larger than you normally wear. It may be awhile before we can make more." Katy swung her stick at a rat that raced toward them, followed by a rather fat cat.

Nessie and Donna walked to the clothing section. They piled shirts and pants into an empty cart.

Mother hurried up the aisle beside them with a cart loaded with towels in front of her. She pulled a cart with bedding behind her. "Where is Katy?"

"I think she went to find soap."

Donna grabbed the cart with the bedding and walked toward the soap section.

Katy walked toward them across the front of the store with a cart full of items.

"What did you find?"

"Soap, shampoo, and razors. We may not have them for much longer. I don't want to imagine living without them."

"We can learn to make our own." Nessie tucked a shirt into the basket as it tried to slip out.

"They won't have any books like that here."

"We can try the library." Nessie stopped beside Katy and looked through the pile in her sister's cart. Lots of soap, some shampoo, and razors. Enough for a year, or more, even for the whole family. She glanced up at her sister's face. Her eyes were wide, and face pale. The enormity of the situation was sustained across her tense shoulders, and the single tear on the verge of toppling out of one eye.

"We will survive." Nessie had survived too much already. Even seeing her own once beautiful home demolished in one of the drone videos.

Katy nodded. "All together. I saw a doll that appeared so real, like a toddler, crumpled on the floor back there. We'll go."

They met up with the rest of the family.

"There aren't any lanes open." Daniel pushed a cart filled with pet food and supplies.

"I haven't seen anyone in here beside us, mice, and rats. Not even employees." Father stopped his cart of gardening tools and looked back as a set of clothing racks fell over.

A large cat pounced out of the rack onto a pile of rats covering an open pile of gathered food.

"We better go home." Nessie pushed her cart toward the customer service desk.

A young woman leaned against the counter. Her long stringy hair spilled out all over the counter. "No closer."

"We have to pay for purchases." Father stepped closer.

"I believe I have the illness too. Take it. Take it all before the rats eat it. The managers won't be back." She held up her arms to bar them back.

"I don't think you can do that," Nessie said. "We don't want to steal what we need."

"Nobody is coming. Everyone is dead." The woman slumped to the floor behind the register.

"We better go." Father pushed the cart out of the store. "She may be right. We can keep an inventory for better times."

That night, the drones flew over the evacuation zone and sent back pictures of fires. Lots of fires. Explosions and more. The last drone picture flickered out of view.

Meanwhile, the garden flourished under a fresh gentle rainfall. One that would hopefully be enough to put out the flames in the oilfield. To wash away the ash, and burned debris.

Broken Dogma

Quella pushed aside a honeysuckle vine from the porch of a large house. It appeared safe enough. Out in the middle of an open field. No trees or large bushes too close for people to hide in. Flowers all along the foundation.

A boom resonated behind her.

She glanced back. No. Not a boom. The dam on the river had breached. Water would take out the few remaining buildings in downtown, and the wounded fighters along with it. No time to worry about them.

The door handle was warm from the setting sun. She turned it, and slipped inside, careful to hide her tracks with the trails of honeysuckle. She locked the door. Out of habit she reached for where a light switch would normally be.

Something moved deeper in the house.

Her hand dropped. She pushed her way through the rubbish gathered around the door. Littered papers, books, and broken electronics. Whoever was there would hear her coming. She stepped into the hallway.

A tiny light glimmered under one door.

She drew in her breath and crept along the hall.

A gasp sounded from the room. A fluttering of unknown substances.

A high pitched female voice broke the silence. "I don't care. I'd rather die than live like this."

"Shh. We don't know who it is."

Quella reached the door. She twisted the handle. She stepped into the room, closing the door behind her.

Two pregnant teens peered back at her from a tattered mattress.

Quella blinked. Scenarios raced through her mind. Three or four combined, into one. She waved them away. "Are we safe?"

A girl nodded. "I was going back for another load of food we hid."

"Where?"

"Under the porch. The flower vines hid the hole we found."

Quella glanced at the covered window, and back at the young women. "You stay here. I'll find it."

They nodded.

Quella stepped back out into the hallway. It took a few moments to reach the front door and open it. The open countryside was clear of people. The bag of food was hidden when the teen said it would be. She locked the door and walked back to where the young women waited. "It'll be dark soon. Better not to have a candle lit. Tell me your names before you blow it out." She handed the bag to the young woman sitting up.

She took the bag and placed it beside her. "I'm Teran and this is my sister Janell."

Janell panted, and squeaked.

Teran glanced at her sister and back to Quella. "Can we trust you?"

Quella nodded. She sat on the edge of the mattress and took Janell's hand. "Tell me."

Teran ran out of the room and returned with a cup of water. She helped her sister drink. "We were part of a megachurch. Went on missions. Did everything like we were supposed to. One morning."

Janell grabbed her arm. "No."

"She can help us. If she doesn't, it doesn't matter anymore." Teran patted her sister's hand. She lifted her up on the lumpy pillows.

"I'll help." Quella blew out the candle. The shadows would have to do. She squeezed Janell's hand. "We are here for you."

Something scuffled outside.

She held her finger up to her lips. Then, she grabbed a piece of material, wound it the width of a finger and place it loosely in Janell's mouth. After a few moment's she held her hand out to indicate that Teran could talk again.

Teran leaned close to her ear to whisper. "One morning, sis realized she was pregnant. It was a secret. Then, I realized I was too. Neither of us had any memory of the event that caused the pregnancy. We'd never go against our religious teachings."

Janell squeezed their hands and bit the cloth in her mouth.

The contractions were real. Quella had arrived not a moment too soon.

"You don't remember?"

"No. We never. Anyway, they locked us up, beat us, and then went off to fight their crusade against nonbelievers."

"And you escaped?"

Teran nodded.

Janell groaned through another contraction. She panted. Her eyes widened. "I deserve to die."

"No one deserves to die." Quella tried to help Janell drink some water.

Janell pushed the cup away.

"I do. A woman can't have a child without a husband."

Quella seethed with rage. This young woman was beautiful in her own right, and every able-bodied person would be needed to rebuild, when the war ended. Eventually, it would end. "Does your child deserve to die?"

"It should not, could not, have been conceived." She groaned and turned her head on the dirty towel pillow. Her lank and damp hair straggled across in and the mattress.

Both young women deserved much more than this garbage filled ruin of a house they all hid in.

Quella glanced from Janell to Teran. "You okay?" She couldn't see the younger girl's face as the shadows deepened through the covered windows.

Teran nodded. "I need my sister. Janell. Stay for me."

Janell gasped. "No. I am broken. It ends with me."

Teran turned away.

Quella touched Teran's shoulder. She couldn't lose her now. If Janell wanted to die, there was nothing she could do to save her. She could keep Teran going.

The night was long and tedious as Janell's contractions continued. Dawn streaked across the sky. Her baby slipped into the world. She slipped out.

Quella dried the infant and handed her to Teran.

Teran pulled the baby close. "She's all I have of my sister." Her tears choked her. The baby slipped down.

Quella nestled the baby out of harm’s way, and pulled Teran close as the sobs wracked her body.

After a while, Teran pulled away. "Name her please. I know what my religion says about women like us. If you name her, and my baby, I can adopt them and raise them."

Quella blinked. Teran had a plan, and it might work. She could convince herself to live that way. Other survivors had.

"I'll name her. We have much to do to survive. We have to find food and water. I'll need to make sure it is safe here."

Teran looked up. "We found a receiver. We can listen to the war news."

If there is any. "Sure. Low volumed will be safe enough. I'll think about a name for the child."

Teran left the room and returned with the receiver. After she turned it on she glanced at her sister's body. "I wish we could bury her."

"We will."

"She can't be buried. She had a baby without being married."

Quella touched her shoulder. "Most cultures in this world have no concept of worrying about marriage before babies. In fact, in many ancient cultures, a woman could not marry before she produced a healthy child. Without a baby, women were free to pursue other activities. Even in those cultures, men helped raise children."

"Those cultures won't go to heaven."

"Did your religion tell you you won't go to heaven because of something someone did to you without your knowledge or consent?"

Teran nodded. A tear trickled down her cheek.

Quella lifted her chin. "Then maybe where they go isn't heaven. Do you care what people who would do this to you, and your sister, think? Is that the life for you, or your child?"

Teran shook her head.

"Look to the future. Make it bright. They don't want you. They used you, abused you, and locked you up. You escaped. Make the best of your life."

Teran looked up at her. "Will we join one of those cultures and find their heaven?"

"We might." Not the answer Quella wanted to give. If it gave Teran hope, it would do. Naming the babies would encourage Teran's healing process. As well as the land and civilization that

remained. The baby wouldn't live if they didn't find milk. Finding a goat or a cow was the next project.

No war sounds close by had been heard since late last night. The receiver cracked the news of the war. It was more distant now. All in their region presumed dead, or missing.

The baby's name would need to convey peace and hope. She checked the baby. The girl was fine.

"I'm going to slip outside. Be back soon. Lock the door behind me. Search for cans of milk or baby formula in the piles. Be careful, and don't fall."

Teran nodded.

Quella slipped out the door.

Fires reached toward the sky all around them. Scorched earth. Clouds gathered. Life giving clouds to quench the scorched earth.

This home had been on a farm, or part of a farm. There might be stranded animals, for food or milk. They needed both.

She went around the back of the house and found an underground cellar next to a small barn. Chickens cackled inside the barn. She pushed the door open. Chickens and sheep. Two sheep with babies. It would have to do.

The cellar was stocked with human and animal food, and empty pails. One would do well to collect milk. If it was sanitary.

They had a future. Quella, Teran, and the two babies would survive together. Here. Until they found another band of survivors.

Cluster

Tollie gazed down the empty, dusty track, towards the center of town.

All the long, narrow homes sat there. Every person in town lived within the cluster of businesses and homes on concrete walls. Even as he looked forward, he gazed backwards, at his past.

Each step seemed to take ages, as he reviewed every moment of his life here, in this peaceful place. His mother had left years ago, for a seaside town. Other than Lynda and Eva, he had no ties to Re-alum.

He didn't want to leave. It was the only place he had lived.

All the adults would be working.

All the children would be in school.

That was the rules of the town. Sometimes, in heavy rain, the solar and wind generators would go out, and people could go home. That was rare.

Nobody could roam away from their job before the bell rang.

No one would even attempt to.

He trudged between the homes placed on concrete walls.

A few workers roamed between them, making sure they were safe.

Someone had probably been at his home to add wheels and move it to the edge of the circle of homes. Wheels. If his home had been moved, there was no place for him in town, ever again.

The idea of his home moving away from the well-worn city walls was more than he cared to think about. He had been on a moving train once. From one side of town to the other. Even at that speed, the hair on his neck stiffened.

Lynda stood outside his tiny wheeled home.

"I had to see you. I know you have to leave."

"I have forty-eight hours. I don't have to pack." Tollie held out his hand. "Unless you want to come with me?"

It wouldn't be difficult to make a decision then. Maybe that seaside town might be a good idea. His mother might be there.

She drew backwards. Her toe drew a circle in the sandy ground. "No, I can't go. I have to stay for Eva. I can't visit tonight. You need

to decide where to go. I am sorry. The train won't be able to take you." She took a step or two away.

Tollie reached out. "Please stay tonight. You can help me pack the dishes. You can help me pick out a direction to go."

Lynda refused to look at him. "I'll have to leave a note for Eva. She will worry."

Tollie tried to laugh. It choked him for some reason. "She knows when you visit. Eva's a big girl. She will choose a job of her own soon."

Tollie reached to draw her close.

Lynda held her head down against his shoulders.

It shouldn't be this way. He hadn't done anything wrong. Pointing out that there was a safer way to store materials shouldn't be a fireable offense.

Being fired gave him forty-eight hours to leave town. Forever.

Without Lynda and Eva. Unless, they wanted to go along.

The afternoon was pleasant.

Lynda helped him pack. She touched each dish tenderly, as if she wanted to remember it forever.

"We'll be fine."

"What is Eva training to be?"

Lynda wrapped the glass figurine his mother left him. "She'll follow in my footsteps."

What those were, Tollie had not known. Lynda had always been vague when describing her job in the interior offices of the railroad house.

Eva arrived after school, bubbly and happy as always.

Her cheerful face would be missed.

She cooked the evening meal outside in the fire pit, as she had for the previous year.

Tollie had been left here at age ten.

Eva was almost ten.

If Lynda would go with him, she could leave Eva behind. Someday, someone would follow them, and could bring her along. If she wanted to join them.

Next morning, Tollie sat in his home and waited.

Everyone had gone to work or school.

Except a woman a few homes over whose newborn child was barely a week old.

He scanned the paper maps his former boss had given him. Roads from many generations ago were long gone. A time when vehicles moved on their own all hours of the day and night. A magical dream for the story tales of young children.

Lynda had pointed out a track the night before. A town might exist there, for people excluded from other towns.

"Hi."

Tollie looked up.

"Here to bring your home fuel. You'll be expected to be an hour away by morning light." Tracky, one of the maintenance people, stood in front of a horse with a loaded cart.

Fuel. Something few people saw. Except when they moved to a new town. Maybe once in a lifetime.

"You know how to drive that thing?"

"Never drove before. I've lived here all my life."

The man nodded. "Hope it starts. Here's the key. You might want to leave before people are home tonight. Too many kids run between the homes."

Tollie took the key and held it to the sun. "How's it work?"

The fuel man leaned back on his cart. "You really don't know? Guess you are a generation too young. You don't look it. I'll show you."

The man took the key and went to one end of Tollie's home. He pushed the chair toward the large window. He put the key in a hole in the wall, and turned it.

The home jerked, and pulled Tollie almost to the floor.

"There you go. You can leave if you are ready."

"How? I've seen one or two homes leave. No idea how."

"You can't miss. Turn this circle the way you want to go, and touch these rectangles from time to time with your feet. You'll figure it out." Tracky left Tollie's home.

Tollie sat in the chair and turned the wheel. The home jerked in that direction. He tapped the rectangles, and figured out which one made it go, and which one jerked it to a stop.

Before long, the town of Re-alum, was far behind him. He allowed his home to go where it would.

The next town by train was a couple of days ride away. Except in special circumstances, only supplies and train drivers were allowed on the train.

The sun began to sink. Tollie stopped his home. He turned the key and pulled it out.

No other homes were in sight.

He opened the door and stepped out.

Eva wouldn't be here to fix the evening meal.

Lynda wouldn't be here to talk to, and share travel dreams with.

Tollie sat beside his home, not even thinking. He had forgotten to ask for more food for the trip.

Something shuffled in the house behind him.

Eva touched his shoulder.

"You aren't supposed to be here. You're supposed to be at your home."

"Who will cook for you?"

"I will. You aren't of age to choose who to live with."

"I will be in a few weeks."

"I'll have to take you back."

Eva pushed him out of the way. "Never! I know secrets. You do to. We'll change the world."

Tollie laughed. "Nobody will listen to me. Or, to a young girl."

Eva built a fire. "I saved some food for us."

"What will your mother think?"

The girl didn't answer.

After they ate, Eva covered the fire. "Back inside. Close the door. Lock it tight. Don't open it."

Tollie laughed. "What's wrong? We can see stars. We can dream."

"Not tonight. They are sending people to make sure you don't make it to the next town with your ideas. If they can't break in, they'll be back in the morning. We'll be gone by then."

"What? That's crazy talk."

Eva touched his chin. "Do you wonder why you didn't hear back from your mother?"

"She went to a seaside town."

Eva shook her head. "Inside now." She dusted her tracks away.

They sat quietly. "Why are you doing this?"

"I can listen. People don't think I can understand what they say. In a few weeks, they would expect me to join them. And act as if I had always been part of their group. I can't, and won't, be part of that."

"Of what?"

"Shh."

Something moved in the distance.

The door rattled.

Bumps and bangs echoed outside.

They sat silently without moving for what had to be hours.

Once the noise dissipated, Eva pulled out two blankets and packed them with clothing and food.

Finally, Eva spoke. "Hurry. We don't have much time."

Tollie pulled the key from his pocket.

"Leave it. They didn't give you enough fuel to go anywhere. You would never move your home again." Eva grabbed a blanket filled with items. She slung it over her shoulder, and crept out the door.

Tollie followed.

Human footsteps that did not belong to either of them circled the fire pit. One set looked like Lynda's.

Eva pulled him into the brush, and away from the only home they had ever known.

Safe Place

The lamp flickered. As the light adjusted, it outlined stacks of paper on a tiny bedside table. Jalena touched the pile. She'd have to hunch over under the tiny bulb to have enough light to see what was on each page.

The door opened. Travis stepped in. "Find it?"

Jalena's hand fell to her side. "It's here. Somewhere."

"You had it a week ago." He sat beside her.

"I made sure I put it someplace safe. I didn't want to lose it."

He laughed. "And promptly forgot it." He bumped her knee with his.

"Yes. That way I wouldn't move it, or lose it." Jalena skimmed the page in front of her. "This isn't it. I don't think any of these are."

He took a handful and fanned them out on the bed. "No red and blue stripes on any of them. Wasn't that the color combination?"

Jalena closed her eyes. She could almost see the page. And almost see where she put it for safe keeping. "I think so. They were on one side. Maybe the top or bottom."

"If it's in a safe place, it's here. We'll find it." Travis took a few more sheets.

"I have to." Without the paper, Jalena wouldn't qualify for the job she had interviewed for. The job of a lifetime. She had spent over a decade preparing for it. With Travis at her side. She might lose it all, if her safe place remained too safe.

"I'll check in the kitchen." Travis stood.

Jalena smiled. "Yeah. You'll find food. I wouldn't store important papers in there. Too much moisture from cooking."

"It'd be the last place a thief would look." He winked at her.

She waved her arm at him. "Oh, go on then."

He smiled and bowed out of the room. Before long, dishes clattered in the kitchen.

She placed the last paper on the sorted pile. It wasn't here. She lifted the stack and set the pages back in the shoebox to be pushed under the bed.

Travis returned with a flashlight. "I'll search in the corners."

"Any luck in the kitchen?" Jalena pushed the covers back. Under the mattress was a possibility. Though, unlikely.

"Nope. Found a few ants interested in that fruitcake we received for the holidays."

"Yikes. They can have it!"

He shone the light under the sagging mattress. "It's only congealed sugar and fruit."

She lifted the mattress for him to search under it. "Too difficult to eat. No flavor, or too many perhaps."

"Too many. No luck. It has to be somewhere."

"Not in the kitchen. Not in the bedroom. Where can it be?" Travis tucked in his side of the bed.

"We don't have any other hiding places." Jalena leaned against the window frame. They didn't even have any more rooms. Except the bathroom. That wouldn't be a safe place to store valuable papers.

"How good did you check the closet?"

"Completely."

"Fine. I'll check the bathroom." He walked out and closed the door.

Jalena sat on the freshly made bed. Where was there? A bedroom, a kitchen, and a bathroom was all the space they had.

She had hidden it when she returned home after the interview. It had been sunny. The door had grabbed her jacket out of her hand. Her jacket.

She hurried to the front door, which led into the kitchen. Her jacket hung on the same hook it always did. Jalena pulled it off and sat at the table. She had felt a rip that day.

The rip had been inside, under her right arm. Sure enough, there was the rip. The missing identification paper had slipped through the hole, and inside her jacket. She had been wearing it everywhere she had gone for three days. "I found it!" She waved it in the air.

Travis joined her. He held her close.

Soon, she would have an income. They could move to a place where they could have three rooms. A sitting room would be delightful, with a reasonably comfortable chair to rest in each evening. Enough light to read a book before bedtime.

A life almost worth living.

Medical Science Fiction

I Don't Mean You

Dinah struggled out of the chair. Another disappointing doctor visit. No answers. No treatment. Walking would soon be a thing of the past. A past she wanted to remember as vividly as if it were today.

She hobbled down the hallway. Aunt Jaden waited for her in the waiting room. Aunt Jaden. Jaded was a good name for her. Dinah took a deep breath. The results of this final test would mean more resentment, more anger, more fear, and a deeper rip in the family fabric. Aunt Jaden was the one who pulled the family apart. Constantly blaming people for failures they had not created. For things done to them, without remorse from the doer. While Dinah herself had always fought to keep the family together. It had been a battle of wits.

She pushed the door to the waiting room open.

Aunt Jaden was in earnest conversation with someone she didn't know. Her arms and hands flared as they made points to the discussion. Her aunt noticed the open door and Dinah. Her words stopped. Her hands dropped. She stood. "Dinah. Good. I have two more appointments."

Not even a, "How did it go?" Dinah struggled out to her aunt.

"Here. I'll help you with your coat." Aunt Jaden held out the coat and helped her into it as if she were three again.

Dinah blinked back tears as a similar memory from three decades ago swept across her mind and body. Much as then, she struggled to hold in her thoughts and feelings. Showing them in front of Aunt Jaden would mean a knock across the bottom. Or her face, if she was particularly assertive.

Out in the hallway of the large medical building, Dinah slowed and placed her hand on Aunt Jaden's arm. "We need."

Aunt Jaden stumbled to a stop and looked back at her with eyebrows raised. "Yes?"

Dinah blinked. She couldn't do it. Not while watching. "My doctor wants me to have a wheelchair. He says I won't be walking long."

Aunt Jaden grabbed her arm to hurry her down the long hallway to the elevator. "As I was telling that poor guy, when people give up too soon, they end on up disability forever, when they could have

done so much. They are too lazy to try. He had one leg. What more does he want?"

Dinah paused and pulled her arm away. "Do you feel that way about me?"

Aunt Jaden stared at her. "Of course not. I didn't mean you. You tried everything you could. Don't make a scene." She grabbed Dinah's arm to propel her along.

Dinah pulled back. "It's time to make a scene. You don't know what that person survived. It may have been as bad, or worse than my diagnosis."

Aunt Jaden struggled to pull her forward. "No need to talk about it here."

"If not here, then where? Will you be saying the same thing about me behind my back tonight?"

Aunt Jaden stared.

Some people at the other end of the hallway had stopped walking and watched them.

"I didn't mean it that way. I want to encourage them."

"Shaming isn't encouraging. If you don't know their past, you don't know if they can push forward and do more. What I can do one day, I can't do the next. I may seem fine one minute, and collapse from exhaustion the next. I don't know when it will happen." She pulled herself away from her aunt to sit on the rock wall of an indoor flower garden. "Don't shame other people. If you do, you are shaming me." She covered her eyes. A hot tear slipped out and slid down her cheek.

Aunt Jaden pulled her close and held her. As if she were three again, and had been whipped for being naughty. "I'm sorry. I'll try to do better. I don't want people to give in to disease before they have to."

Dinah wiped her nose and sniffed. "I know you mean well. I don't want to read about that man, or anyone, on the suicide news because they were shamed into ending their lives. You don't realize what comfort they bring others." Her words bubbled out. The words she had held in too long. Words she wished she had said before her own mother's name had appeared on the suicide list. Soon followed by her brother.

"Aunt Jaden. Promise me. Never again."

Aunt Jaden pulled away and grabbed her face in both hands. Thick tears streamed down her face. "I'll try. I didn't mean for them to."

Together they cried.

Finally, Dinah wiped her eyes and stood. "We'll go find that wheelchair."

"I'm not ready. To see you in a wheelchair." Aunt Jaden clasped her hands. "You'll always be my niece. That little girl in braids. I don't want to see you older than me."

"I'm not. It's the disease. I'll only use it when needed. It'll help me go out and about more. I won't have to sit and worry if I have enough energy to go shopping, or go somewhere fun. I'll be able to do both."

Aunt Jaden nodded. "Wait. Sit here. I have something I need to do before we go." She struggled to rise.

Dinah sat.

Her aunt teetered down the hall, back toward the doctor's office. In her struggle, Dinah noticed a limp she hadn't recognized before.

She had had a limp every single family gathering as far back as Dinah could remember. Aunt Jaden always claimed she had twisted her ankle.

A few minutes later, she returned. The limp slowed her down.

Dinah stood. Her aunt wasn't simply pushing others. She pushed herself to hide an injury. Somehow, she'd discover what it was. Without breaking the spirit of her aunt.

"I had an apology to make." Aunt Jaden took Dinah's arm and they hurried on to the elevator.

The Gift

The end of a long day.

One more patient.

Ms. Whatever her name was. She complained of pain more often than not. The sooner he saw her, the sooner he could finish his paperwork for the day in peace and quiet.

Dr. Burnt opened the door.

She sat on the examining table as if she were a patient patient.

"How are you today?"

"A high pain day." The woman held out her hand. She had a tiny scratch on the back of it. Not infected or anything.

"Where is the pain today?" He closed his eyes in frustration. Too many of these women complained of pain, without any visible cause. No broken bones. No results via a blood test, x-ray, or even a CAT scan.

"My arms ache and my legs. I can't lift my hand as high as my shoulder."

"It's your age. Not something to worry about."

"Are you sure? How will I dress myself?"

"Um." Good question. Not something which had been covered in medical school. How did you help people who couldn't do for themselves anymore? No matter. "There is nothing in your bloodwork, or other test results, to indicate you have any reason to feel pain. No arthritis in the x-rays. No infection in the blood. Nothing. Your bone density is normal for someone your age and weight."

"Is my weight abnormal?"

"Wouldn't hurt to lose a few pounds. Everyone can afford to lose a few at least."

The old woman looked at him. "Are you sure? I remember being ninety pounds and being told that."

"How old were you then?" Doctor Burnt asked.

"About thirty, I think."

"That's difficult to believe at your height." He checked his chart. At ninety pounds, she should have been hospitalized. Could there be a connection? That was thirty years ago. She was currently at least ten pounds beyond the recommended weight for her height.

"Even if you can't see the pain, it is there. It is suffocating."

"I'm sorry. I can't see it." He shuffled his feet. "I'm sure it would help if I could."

The woman twisted her head and peered up at him, rather like a bird on his windowsill. "I can give you the Gift."

He laughed. "What gift?"

"The Gift of feeling what any person you are within ten feet of feels."

That would make diagnosing much easier. Of course, it was quackery. Not even alternative medicine said that could be done. "Sure. Why not." Best to humor the old woman. Maybe she'd leave, and find another doctor when it didn't work.

"Are you sure you accept the Gift?" The old woman struggled to speak.

Doctor Burnt laughed. "Sure. You only have a scratch on the back of your hand. It doesn't hurt. I'll prove it to you." She couldn't bare a simple scratch. How had she lived to be sixty years old?

The old woman smiled. She reached out and touched his hand.

A fog descended.

A heavy weight dropped him to the ground. It seemed as if the whole world had landed on his chest. He struggled to breathe.

The light was fuzzy. His eyes stung. He couldn't see. He clawed at them, to clear them of the matter that had to be hiding his vision. Tears poured down his cheeks.

His arms and legs burned as if scratched by sandpaper.

Doctor Burnt could hear his own heart pounding in his chest as if it wanted out. His ears felt heavy, and floaty, as if they were on the ceiling listening for him, and redirecting the loud sounds to his brain.

He could smell a dark and dank odor. An odor he didn't recognize. That odor would inform him what was wrong with the woman.

He gasped. He was on the ground at her feet. The woman's chart was under the examining table. His arms couldn't stretch far out enough to reach it.

"Stop it. Stop it."

"I can't. You accepted it. The Gift of Pain Empathy is yours till you find someone to pass it on to." She struggled up. "If you can't help me, I'll leave."

"I can't bear it."

"You will feel the pain of those within ten foot of you. For as long as they are so close. I'll leave. You will feel better." She struggled, pushed, and pulled herself off the examining table. She tottered out the door.

As she left, his vision cleared. His ears returned to normal. His arms worked again. The smell dissipated.

Doctor Burnt reached for the folder under the examining table. His hands shook as he pulled it closer.

If her words were true, it could be a long time before he was free of the Gift. It could be used to help heal, if he could withstand the pain of his patients while diagnosing them.

A nurse passed him in the hall.

He struggled as a sharp pain in his hip radiated down to his knee. He gasped and grabbed his hip.

The nurse stared.

Back at his computer, he struggled to write in the woman's chart. The pain, feelings, and even the smells revisited him. Rather than add his usual terse note, he began to search for the symptoms. Maybe she did have a real medical diagnosis. He'd find it.

Virology

"It's warm in here." Sabelle fanned herself. "Wish the windows opened."

"Take your clothes off. You'll be fine." Krill touched her hand.

"That wasn't cute twenty years ago." Sabelle pulled away from his reaching hand. "Haranda, Geoan, and Farindel are almost grown. When will you quit acting Haranda's age?"

"Never." Krill laughed. "They aren't even here. Haranda is with a lover. Geoan and Farindel are collecting food."

"Doesn't matter. It isn't normal or healthy for our age. Are you sure you haven't taken a young lover?"

"You aren't exactly interested anymore."

"No. I'm way past child bearing age. We had three. Why would I want more? I had the virus purged from my body after Farindel was born. I thought you did too. You were supposed to."

Krill sat back down. "I did at your request."

Sabelle touched his hand. "Then you took an infected lover?"

He looked away. "She wanted a child. Her husband couldn't give her one. The virus didn't take with him. He had no interest. Or ability. I don't know which."

"Go see Dr. Trebell. The virus can be eliminated. You know that."

"I have to wait. Jeneba wants this baby. She wants me to be the father."

"Jeneba? She's barely a few years older than Haranda."

"She's been trying for years. Give me another month."

"And if this doesn't work? Who will she choose next?"

"Nobody. She's supposed to go for a checkup next week. Dr. Trebell said that would work, hopefully."

"Dr. Trebell is aware of this. Why don't you go to Jeneba, if the virus is back?"

"You wouldn't want me to. She doesn't want you to know. She knows we are supposed to be spending the afternoon together."

Sabelle waved at him. "Go to her. Allow the virus to run its course with someone who appreciates it. She does. I don't. I'm too old."

Krill stood.

"You are breaking the law. You cannot have the virus once one of your children does."

"Haranda. I didn't consider her. Surely, Dr. Trebell knows."

"You better pack a bag until the virus runs its course, and you can return home. A month to wait? And it takes about three months for it to run its course once treatment begins."

Krill's face paled. "Geoan will be ready for the virus by then."

"You're choice. I'll be sure and inform them." Sabelle adjusted herself on the couch. All hers until her children were virus free.

"I've only been re-infected for a month."

"You will have to be reported. If we had discussed this, you could have moved in with Jeneba, and no report would be needed."

"You would report your husband?"

"Guardianship laws have to be followed. Especially by my family. Can't allow them to slip."

Krill nodded. "I'll go. I should have remembered."

"You should have."

He left the room.

Sabelle smiled. This was grounds for far more than a five-month exile. He could be sent to live with Jeneba permanently. Which was probably the better solution. Although, it would leave her alone in a few years.

Haranda was happy with her lover, and likely to announce her first child soon. They would make their own home, rather than stay with her.

Geoan was well liked enough. A few girls had already asked to be his first lover.

Farindel. Her last child. The daughter she hadn't been sure she wanted. This child would stay with her and inherit the family home.

Krill returned with his belongings in a bag. Not much more than he had arrived with over twenty years ago. "I'm sorry. I didn't consider how it would jeopardize our family."

Sabelle glanced up. Unlikely. "How many lovers since Farindel was born?"

"I don't have to answer that."

She nodded. "Thought so. No, you don't have to answer. You have the right. As long as they are virus free. However, if you were virus free, you wouldn't have the interest."

Krill shook his head. "I did have the interest. Always. Even when Dr. Trebell said I shouldn't be bothered by it anymore. There was no

living virus in my system. I still was attracted to every woman I saw, at least as strongly as when the virus had taken over."

"I hope Geoan won't have that problem. It will have to be notated in his medical file. Any lover who takes him will have to know."

"Didn't you ever have another lover? He doesn't even act like me. I wasn't sure he was mine."

"No. I was ready to have the virus removed after Haranda was born. I waited so you would be happy."

"And I wasn't. I would like to speak to Geoan before he is given the virus." Krill tugged at his bag.

"I'll ask him if he wants to speak to you. It will be his choice."

She picked up the book beside her and flipped the pages.

Krill walked out and closed the doors.

Quiet. Something rare in a busy household. Sabelle dropped the book to her lap. No. The virus had not been wanted. Only children to follow her. Without the pain of the process.

Krill had been a good partner. At times. When he wasn't off chasing after women.

It'd be easy to find a partner without the virus. If she wanted one. It'd be better not to. At all.

A memory from her mother made her shiver. Of a time that all men had the virus. And most women. Against their will. The days had been dark when the doctors discovered how to kill the virus, and only allow it to be active during reproductive years.

The virus.

It had been known to drive men to insanity. To hurt and kill those they lived with.

It had forced women into lives they didn't remember. Lives they trashed when the saw others living the same way, not knowing that themselves were little more than pawns to a virus.

No more.

Unless doctors like Dr. Trebell had forgotten, and were not paying attention. If the virus were loose again, the country, and the world, would be devastated.

Sabelle had work to do.

Her own father had implemented the plan to deactivate the virus. She'd find a way to interrupt those who wanted it to run wild again.

Invalid Generation

"I'm sorry."

"Nurse. Please. There is hope?" Camilla hugged toddler Hanna to her chest.

"I'm sorry. She's like the others. The damage is permanent. There is nothing you can do." Nurse Olsen closed the case file.

"There has to be. She can't stay a three-year-old forever. Who will take care of her when I die?"

The nurse sighed. "We are trying to figure out what will happen. Seems every child under eight has been affected."

"A whole generation?" George squeezed his wife's hand. "We have to help them."

"Sometimes what we believe helps doesn't. We have to go on. We have to accept that they are people, like us. With strengths and weaknesses. Help them live. We have to find a solution for the following generation that isn't born. They will have to take care of this generation."

"What went wrong?" Camilla patted Hanna's head.

Hanna pulled away and ran to the toy box in the corner.

"No one knows. Introduce Hanna to Lizzy. She's five. Same problem. A year ago, she was reading five years above her level. Now, picture books are about all she can manage."

"She won't regress more?" George helped his wife up.

"Unlikely." Nurse Olsen opened the door and pointed down the hall. "My daughter is in my office."

The nurse strode straight-backed down the hall, away from her office.

Camilla touched Hanna's hand. "Come."

Hanna pulled away.

"Bring the book with you."

"I'm going to see if I can talk to the doctor more." George stepped out of the door. "They have to know something. Someone knows."

He couldn't allow his daughter become a vegetable. Camilla closed her eyes. They had had such high hopes for their daughter. Her newborn brain scans had shown she would be as adept as her

parents. Perhaps even a brain surgeon, if computer coding or heart surgery hadn't met her desires.

Today's scan revealed the news that her brain was misfiring. Like all the young children in the valley. She would remain mentally an infant, even when her body became an adult.

An infant's mind trapped in an adult body. Unable to communicate even the basics. No child who had deteriorated could talk in complete sentences anymore.

"Hanna."

Hanna sat back on her heels and stared at her mother.

"We'll go meet Lizzy."

Hanna should have been excited and asking all about Lizzy by now.

Instead, she set the book down and stood. She held out her hand and waited.

A good infant child, for now. That might not be the case later.

Camilla shivered as she reached for her daughter's hand.

While in college, she had worked with some of those adults whose minds had remained locked in infancy. At the time, maybe one out of ten thousand people had such severe cases.

One boy, a teen would never walk, talk, or do more than grunt. He had no use of his hands or legs. His eyes jerked as he glanced every which way. Was the boy always afraid? Of what? Or whom?

Another, a teen girl, ran and played like a two-year-old. She could speak a little. She didn't know her own name. Or her teachers. She didn't recognize her parents. Every day was as if she were a newborn.

A third, an eighteen-year-old boy had anger control issues and had to be removed from the program. A teacher had attempted to help him put on his coat. A simple skill he couldn't do for himself. He had turned on her, and beat her until her blood covered the floor. When Camilla pulled him away from her friend's bloody body he had cried. "Speak." At least a hundred times. Her blood dripped from his hands and clothes as he jerked to reach for the woman's broken body.

Restraints had been used as a last resort to keep him from doing more damage to her friend's body. He had not been allowed to return to the program.

That teacher had been Camilla's friend. The only adult the boy with anger issues would allow near him. Her death at the hands of the scared infant trapped in an adult body, had left deep scars in the community. Camilla had left medical care that day. Coding had seemed safer.

Had whatever they had done to try to prevent such damage actually caused it?

Camilla walked down the hall and knocked on Nurse Olsen's door. "Lizzy, may we come in?" She gulped, afraid to open the door.

This girl was young. Barely five. Her life wasn't in danger from Lizzy.

She opened the door.

Lizzy played with a puzzle on the floor.

Hanna ran to join her.

"I remember. It won't happen." Nurse Olsen stood behind her. "If the doctors don't figure something out, we'll make sure the adults they live with are not harmed. We need you here. You know what can happen."

"I don't want them all stuck in a line of cold, empty rooms."

"No. They can't be at home alone. Not at any age. We will have to change as a society. Have people living at home again."

"I already do."

"That's why we need you. You'll know. No parent can raise more than one. And we don't want to take a child away. Many may not know they aren't at home."

"Can we reach into their brains? Unlock them?" It had once seemed simple. Communicate with a part of the brain with some device that could do for the child, and future adult, what they couldn't do for themselves.

"That is what you were studying. Seven years ago."

A grunt distracted them.

The girls had completed the puzzle and had pulled out another box of pieces.

"I can go back to my notes. I can study again. Which doctor is running the study?"

Nurse Olsen leaned against the doorframe. "None. They were too scared to mess with it after you left the project."

"George didn't tell me."

"Why would he? He wanted you to recover. And the few children were always someone else's. Now, they are ours. Every child in the valley. Hanna was the last to be tested."

"It is up to me." Camilla glanced back at the happily playing children.

Somehow, their future had to be saved. They had to reach into their minds, and communicate. In some forgotten method. There were thoughts buried deep in there. Forgotten knowledge. Reaching it. Reaching up. It had to work.

A lost generation could cascade into the future, threatening the stability of the population as a whole. These children had to grow up into adults. Adults with memories, hopes, dreams, and abilities.

Adult Orphanage

Ashley turned off the busy interstate highway. She drove down one long over packed road after another. Ten miles took nearly thirty minutes to reach her destination. She turned down the river road. It was almost deserted as most people raced from one job to another, or perhaps to their sleeping places.

She paused at a roadside pull-off. A brown and muddy river had been beautiful many generations ago. Dead limbs stood where trees had once towered over the river. Sludge filled, the oily stream struggled downstream to join the ocean.

The pull-offs had been designed to make this a place to eat between jobs for today's workers. Few wanted to stop here and contemplate what their great grandparents had done to the environment.

Or how long the destruction would remain. If they were lucky, and worked every waking moment, the grandchildren of today's infants would once again see the river as it was meant to be seen. Maybe, even able to swim in it and fish from it again. It had been nearly sixty years since that had been possible.

Ashley started the car and drove on to her destination. A dilapidated building that had once been an elementary school, and formerly a high school leaned out over the murky water below. A broken and rusted fence hung at odd angles where it remained semi-upright.

Ashely pulled into the parking lot. Most of the asphalt was overgrown with weeds. A small maintained section was large enough for a delivery truck, five cars, and an ambulance. She parked in the only open place.

Before she stepped out, she observed the surroundings. A grim place. It had once been three wings of a beautiful two-story school, with an open courtyard in the center. Any plantings in it were long gone. It had been paved over, easier to move about, and to clean. A single plant holder stood at the door that was supposed to be the front registration counter. Patients arrived by ambulance. They left the same way.

She picked up her tablet and recorder. This wouldn't be the worst place she had done this job. Recording the stories of the

childless generation. The worst had been the prison in the Florida Keys. Or maybe, the former prison in California.

The people here weren't to blame for the damage done to the environment, or even to themselves. That was their grandparent's fault. Though the grandparents of the initial childless generation, blamed their grandchildren for their circumstances. As if they could control the fickle job market themselves. Or the failing environment.

Ashely snorted at the memory.

She stepped through the unlocked front doors. A metal security detector leaned at an awkward angle, ready to fall. A remnant from the tiny baby boom after this generation was past child bearing age, when their younger cousins raced to have children between economic downfalls. This place had been a packed elementary school for seven years, and closed three years later, when few, if any children were born.

The counter was covered in stacks of paper tossed about as if someone had pawed through them in a great hurry.

"Can I help you?"

Ashley glanced at the man who spoke. He was in front of the counter pushing an empty wheelchair. "I'm Ashley. Here for the history recording project."

The man nodded. "I'm Ethan. Glad you could visit. I'll show you the way to reception. Follow me." He rolled the empty chair down the hall.

"They'll appreciate their stories being remembered. Do you believe they will be?" He stopped and stared at her.

Ashely looked away, and then back. "I hope so. That is the goal. My childless generation will be the last. We will rebuild what the past destroyed."

"Will their stories be heard?"

"They will. In a bright future." At least, she hoped. After the war, the law required almost every able-bodied person to work one commerce job, and one clean up job. Whether recycling, cleaning water ways, planting trees, gardens, working with animals, or any of a dozen other jobs which would hopefully bring the planet back to life.

The initial childless generation hadn't fared well. They'd fought to bring the Earth back to life. In return, the toxins their bodies had absorbed had damaged them beyond functioning. The heroes and

heroines were unable to work any job. They were bundled off to these care homes. There weren't enough young, able-bodied people to care for them, and try to save the planet.

Ethan pushed the wheelchair down a dingy green hall. Rubber skid marks crisscrossed the unwashed floor. He stopped at another counter. "Emma, Olivia. Ashley is here."

Two women a year or two younger than herself stepped out of an inner room laughing.

"Who are you taking her to see?" One of the women twirled her hair and eyed him.

"Who is awake today?" He ignored her look.

"Half the Jasons, a few Brians, Williams, two Dans, three Tims, Jeremy, and one Chad." The other nurse flipped her clipboard.

"Four Jennifers, two Amys, three Kims, leave Kim P alone, four Heathers, two Elizabeths, Amanda, and three female Tracys. The male Tracy is not available for visitors today. " She snapped it shut and glanced at Ashley. "How many do you hope to speak to today?"

Ashely drew her breath in. Most visits she recorded two or three people per day. She could be here a month. "I hope to speak to three of the women today. Maybe the Jennifers."

The brisker nurse nodded. "One refuses to answer to anything other than Jenny. Another, refuses to answer to Jenny."

"I'll ask them what they prefer to be called." Many people had a preferred name pronunciation. An Ashley back home only answered to Ashes.

The brisk nurse ushered the giggly nurse back into the inner office.

Ethan pushed the empty chair down the hall.

After the door clicked shut he paused and grinned at her. "I don't understand Emma. She thinks I'll be interested in her. I'm not. Nor in silent Olivia. My partner works on the river. She's working on a way to filter out the impurities."

"I read about someone trying to filter the whole river."

"That's her! If the people here didn't need me, I'd stay on the river with her. My aunt is here. She is deafblind, and needs someone she can trust. The J hall is this way." He led her through the maze to an open door. "All four Jennifers live in here. It isn't nice."

Ashley walked through the door he held open.

Four tiny hospital beds. One in each corner. A dingy lightbulb hung above each. No sound, other than a fly buzzing. The women didn't even glance at her.

"I'll be back in half an hour." Ethan plodded on down the hall.

Ashley turned to the first Jennifer. Her paper name plate read Jenny. She pulled up the only dirty chair in the room. "Hi. I'm Ashley. I'm here to record your stories."

The woman grunted. "We rarely talk."

"Can you explain why?"

"Nobody to talk to." Her voice creaked. "Nothing to say. Almost forgot how."

"Do the nurses talk to you?"

"Only to say it's meal or medicine time. Ethan tries."

"How often is he here?" She opened her tablet and typed a few words.

"About ten minutes a week per room." Jenny closed her eyes.

It always took a while to begin a conversation. Once it began, all the fear and pain of their lives bubbled over the broken dams, and gushed forth, covering the barren plains with polluted water. It was their memories contaminated with pain, fear, and self-loathing.

"What stories would you like the world to know about you?"

Jenny's hand reached for hers. "I wanted to be an archeologist. I wanted to explore and find the unknown civilizations of my forgotten and criminalized ancestors."

"Which ancestors?"

Jenny smiled. "My Native American ancestors. Not sure which tribe I belonged to. Likely more than one. Too many combined in later years to survive."

It was true. What had once been thousands, or tens of thousands of tribes, was now officially only three. None were full blooded. All were mixed, either from multiple tribes, or with Europeans and Africans who had arrived much later. "What happened?"

"I went to college. Professors did not believe I would succeed. No jobs upon graduation. I took a fast food job, hoping to find a career in my field. My dreams were forgotten. I scraped a living, until I no longer could. Couldn't breathe, eat, or walk."

"What did you see?"

Jenny gripped the paper-thin blanket. "I was part of the crew that blew up the dam. The largest dam in the country. We had to allow the water to flow again. If it didn't, your generation would have died before birth."

Ashley nodded. She had met many who had been in the resistance organizations. Many lived in the prison care centers. Not all.

"Were you caught?"

"In the flood. Broke both legs. Would never walk again."

"Thank you."

Jenny smiled. "Is the water clear?"

"In some places. The Colorado is mostly clear. Not here though. We don't know why."

"I did once. I understood the deep underground water tables. All of it was stored on the internet, for anyone to see and use. Then, they hid it. Some of us kept copies. There are still some. Somewhere."

"What do you remember?"

"Something about the cycle. It cycles in and out of deep wells in the ground. Wells that had been filled with garbage for generations. Even before the Dusty Revolution. If you can't take the rubbish out, the water will not run clean."

"Can you talk to Ethan about this? He works on cleaning up the river."

Jenny smiled. "I'll try. If he has time. You won't tell anyone what I told you?"

Ashely typed something in her notebook. "All confidential. Unless you want me to use your real name."

"I have no family. I don't think the authorities will come after me."

"No. Most were forgiven and pardoned. You fought to save our country. Do you remember the toxic decades?"

Jenny closed her eyes. "The earliest, I was a child. A young girl with serious allergies and asthma. The air and water had been cleaned up. Then. The toxic people returned to power, and tried to destroy the land, air, and water once again."

"And you stopped them."

"Hardly me. It took tens of thousands of us to block them. A flock of angry mother hens who hadn't had a child of their own."

"Could you have?"

"No. The toxins destroyed me as a child. I fought to give my nieces and nephews a chance. They waited too long to have children, based on the social prescription for marriage and child care of the time.

"Many of you who fought couldn't have children." Ashely made a few notes and clicked boxes on the forms.

"We fought to save the land for future generations. Are the animals back?"

"In some areas. New animals. Loose animals from some of the zoos. It's a different world."

"No television anymore?"

"No. It was used for evil. People have to work too many hours, they aren't living."

"Like my generation. That's not good."

"There is hope. Soon."

"Keep up the fight. Keep it." Jenny held her hand.

"What do you do each day?"

"Re-live the past. What did we do wrong? What could we have done different? Should we have died?"

Someone knocked on the door.

Ashley looked up.

Ethan opened the door. "Do you want to see anyone else today?"

"No. Jenny needs to share her story with you."

He smiled and wheeled the empty chair to the bed. Ethan pulled it up beside her bed and sat in it. He reached his hands out to Jenny. "Tell me."

Ashley glanced at him. His hands. One was not human. It was bionic. She realized why he had the chair when she peeked at his legs. One leg was too thin. Bionic also.

He held his finger up to his lips. "Patients know. Nurses don't. And mustn't. Especially Emma."

Ashley nodded. He was one of the revolutionaries. One who survived. His reward had been a working leg and arm. As well as fighting to save the river he valued almost more than people. It made sense.

He wasn't only Ethan.

He was the Ethan who had led the Water Rescuers. He had been sucked into a turbine and almost lost his life. One of the last to be given prosthetics.

The prosthetic makers had died trying to save lives. Their secret methods had disappeared with them. Many of the prosthetic materials had been outlawed. Scientists were trying to find ways to return the unknown materials to a safe, natural state. Future prosthetics would be wooden, or other natural materials. Once trees fully matured in forests again.

Future Endings

Euth Home

Rain pattered against the window.

Trillia rolled over. She gasped from the pain in her hip and leg. As if a knife twisted and ran up and down her leg. She pulled the covers tighter. The warmth should settle the crawling muscles.

A cold fall rain pattered against the windows. Another season of pain and anguish. Pain had already seeped into her bones. Even handling the remote to turn on the television took too much effort.

She dozed. For how long she didn't know.

"Momma?" Rendal walked into the room and sat beside the bed. She touched Trillia's hand.

Trillia opened her eyes and glanced at her daughter. A beautiful young woman, untouched by chronic life-debilitating pain. For now. No one knew if she would develop this condition, or not. "Yes daughter?"

"Are you sure you want to go to the Euth home? Maybe someday."

Trillia closed her eyes. She tried to lift her hand. It raised mere inches. Grey splotched fingers sagged. Where once they had been soft, supple, and strong. No longer. Not for many years.

No doctor could find a cause.

Without a cause, there would be no cure.

Without a cure. She had already wasted away to skin and bone.

She wouldn't survive long. At the Euth home, there would be hope for others. Her death would bring that hope.

"Have to go. Other's chance." Too difficult to find the words. They rattled around her brain in sluggish, unpredictable ways. They were there. Not always in the order they needed to be. After her death, her mind would work again. Separated from whatever damaged strings kept it from working, and several years of debilitating pain.

Rendal looked away. Her tear streaked cheeks glinted in the sunlight peeking through the window.

It should be raining. The world should grieve the loss of every mother. Every woman.

The sunshine. Sunshine meant hope for those women who could not be cured.

Trillia struggled to speak. To comfort her own daughter. "For you too. If this comes. You won't suffer. Cause. Cure." She gasped. How long she struggled to breathe she didn't know.

Trillia's eyes opened.

Rendal stood at the window staring out. Her hair framed her face. The silhouette was all Trillia saw. The younger woman turned. For a second, that shadow looked like Rendal as a toddler, struggling to learn to walk.

Trillia wanted to reach out and help her daughter through this moment. A moment no one wanted to happen. It had to. Her hand shook on top of the light blanket covering her shriveled body. Bones hurt so bad, she couldn't even handle the weight of a full quilt to hold in the warmth. "Now."

Rendal reached out a hand. "I'll wash and dress you. I have a wheelchair in the hall."

Trillia closed her eyes to the coming pain. As each limb was gently lifted and washed, the searing and shooting pain in her muscles caused her to cry out. New bruises would join the millions of others that covered her from head to toe. Best to drift away and not feel it.

She woke as Rendal helped her into the wheelchair.

"I'll fix your hair. How would you like it? Down the back? In a ponytail?"

Trillia's hair clung to her scalp. It prickled. A long stringy mess. While hanging straight down, it pulled hard. In a ponytail, it pulled worse, and caused her to see colored spots from the pain. "Cut it. Short. Wipe it clean."

"Momma? Short?"

Trillia had always valued her long hair. Down below her waist until she had been sick a year. Then below her shoulders for the last several years. "Yes."

Rendal left the room. She returned and lifted each lock before cutting it. She placed the bits on Trillia's lap.

Trillia gazed down at the mess covering her hands. Yes, a grey matted mess, wet with her daughter's tears. Her tears soon joined them. Nothing would have made her hair grow healthy and shiny again.

The ride to the Euth home was long and short. The passage of time had ceased to make sense. Her mind flitted away. Leaving her body to suffer whatever it couldn't bear with her mind present.

"Momma. We are almost there. Do you want to stop at the park and see the lake?"

Trillia groaned. She wanted to say no. The pain was bad. Movement hurt too much. However, for her daughter, she'd give it every effort she could. She lifted her head. "If you want."

Rendal pulled into a parking space. She slipped the wheelchair out of the ties in the van and rolled it down the ramp.

Every bump, every jounce, could ricocheted through Trillia's bones. A bruise swelled on her thumb when her hand bounced and hit her bony knee.

Rendal pushed her down the asphalt path as gently as possible. She chatted the whole time about days gone by.

Trillia drifted off. Every spot of this lake park was as familiar as her own home.

Rendal had practically grown up here. Chasing butterflies and birds. Running across those open fields, that now were shaped into a place to play various ball games. They used to swim in the lake, out to that tiny island, barely big enough for a picnic. Then, her brother and father had been here. Today, both were long gone, to a city far away.

Rendal stopped them in front of the paddleboat dock. A place they used to visit. No paddleboats here now. It was winter. They were stored away from the chill and potential ice.

"Time."

Rendal bent down. "Momma, I wish I could hug you one more time. I know it hurts." Tears dripped down her cheeks.

Trillia tried to nod. Her neck popped painfully. She could no longer reach up to pop it back into place. It wasn't fair to her daughter. She had allowed this to go on too long. A hug would break more bones. Many had broken multiple times already. Even being placed gently in the chair, it felt as if her wrist might have cracked again.

Rendal stood and peered out over the lake. She steered the chair back to her van.

When Trillia woke again, they had pulled up to the Euth home.

Rendal glanced at her. "Momma. One moment more. I want to see your face one more time."

Trillia tried to smile. It was worth the effort and pain for her daughter.

Rendal dried her tears. She backed the wheelchair out and pointed it toward the building. After a few deep breaths, she stepped forward.

Trillia wanted to assure her daughter it would all be okay. She knew it wouldn't. Not for a while. Rendal would miss her. As her husband and son had not. She would miss the mother she had been, and even the pain-filled shell she had become.

Inside they waited at the desk. Before long, the receptionist ushered in a man and a woman.

The woman stepped forward. "I'm nurse Quintella. This is doctor Kelar. We will talk to you about your decisions today." She led them to a room with several chairs and an open place for the wheelchair.

Once settled, the nurse spoke to her. "Tell us about you."

Trillia tried to talk. Words tumbled out all jumbled. She turned to her daughter.

Rendal closed her eyes before beginning the story of the previous decade. Pain. Broken bones. Loss of mobility. Loss of motor control. Loss of speech. Memory issues. Words were there. Long forgotten words.

The nurse and doctor nodded throughout Rendal's speech. They'd heard it all before.

"I'll miss mom." Rendal turned away and hid her face with her hands.

"I'm sure you will. Trillia, we've had a chance to go over your medical records. You are sure you want to leave your body to science to figure out what is causing your disease?"

Trillia nodded. The pain made her sleepy. She slipped in and out of consciousness. Her biggest fear was they would determine she wasn't of sound mind to make the decision to end the suffering.

Quintella touched her hand. "We require you to reside here with meals and 24-hour care for three days. Are you willing to do that?"

Three more days of wracked pain. If she could survive it. At least Rendal wouldn't be the only person taking care of her. She glanced at her daughter.

"I'll be here. As long as you want me."

Trillia tried to grin. Of course she would. Her daughter had been there for the entire illness, giving up her own future. Even foregoing dating to care for her mother. With no career, what would her daughter do after her death?

The next three days passed in a blur. Quintella frequently spent time in the sunlit room, talking to Rendal, making plans for the future. A future without pain. Without Trillia.

At last, evening approached. The sun's rays grew long.

Kelar and Quintella entered the room. Rendal held her hand.

"This is your last opportunity to change your mind," Quintella tucked in the sheet around her feet.

"Ready." Trillia smiled at her daughter.

Her daughter squeezed her hand. "I'm here."

Trillia closed her eyes and remembered no more pain. Her final thoughts were pain free and joyful. Without the chains of broken bones, and gasping for breath, her soul pulled free. Free to move without grinding broken bones, or bruising mottled skin. Her mind functioned again. She remembered.

Rendal sat beside her holding her broken hand. "Momma is at peace."

Kelar nodded. "We will do our best to determine what caused her illness. Do you have a place to go?"

"Yes. I want to be a nurse like Quintella, and help others find peace."

Trillia's soul relaxed. Her daughter would live.

Mines

A wall loomed ahead. The wall led to the mines. Kendra paused and stared at the gates. It was highly illegal for her to step beyond them. For another fifteen years.

She wouldn't be here another fifteen years. Trista, twelve, depended on this burst of income, and Kendra's death insurance to support her until adulthood.

Kendra wiped a tear from her cheek. She couldn't go in crying. The cancer would kill her before the mine. Even if the mine wasn't legal for anyone her age. She wouldn't be having more children. She wouldn't be there to raise Trista.

People pushed by her. Mostly older men who would spend the final few years of their lives in the mines, where they would make more money in a month, than in a year at any other job.

A song began behind her. The song of the miners.

Kendra squared her shoulders and marched to the gate.

The man checking identification was familiar.

She had changed her name, and had new identification cards created to take this job. He shouldn't recognize her.

He checked her card. "Kendra. Starting today?"

She nodded.

He smiled. "No need to be afraid. Wait over here. After the shift is all in, I'll take you to your station. You'll be outside, sorting."

Kendra moved to the appointed place. A rocky bench. Sorting. The pay for sorting was one-third the pay for inside work. She needed money. Fast. Her doctor had given her less than six months to live. Her daughter needed money for food and rent until she was old enough to work.

The last miner hurried through the gate.

The gatekeeper closed the gate and locked it from the inside. He walked up to her. "We do have office openings."

"What? I'm here to be paid to work and leave support for my daughter."

He smiled. "Sorry. You look young for this work. Most women over forty have a few wrinkles. At least around their eyes. I'm sure the bosses approved your application. I'd rather you didn't run the risks. I'm Travis." He held out his hand.

She touched his fingertips. The risks. Cave-ins, slides, methane, water, oil, fracking fluids, and other forgotten, unspoken hazards. Most miners lived a few years, if that. It was a place the dying went to hasten the end. "I know the risks."

Travis tilted his head. "You don't look, or act, like the typical woman who comes here."

"I have my reasons."

"They all do."

"You mind the gate."

Travis laughed. "I have almost no exposure to the dangers. It's one of the safer jobs. Supposed to train a replacement, if I want to go deeper into the mines."

"Do you?"

"I have too much to live for. I'll take you to sorting."

"Wait. I want to work deeper in the mine."

He stared at her. "You are an enigma. There is plenty of time. A week in sorting is required." He escorted her to an entrance to the right of the mine entrance.

She sighed. It probably was. An enigma? Did anyone use words like that anymore? Those were used in ancient paper copies of books. Barely legal to own.

The door to a brick building leaned on its hinges. A mountain loomed behind it.

"Sorry. Can't go in. This is sorting. Good luck. Should see you tonight."

"You can't go in?"

"Not for another month." He smiled at her and walked back to the locked gate.

Kendra smiled. He must be not quite of age. Though, they allowed him to work the gate. He must recognize she was too young to legally be here.

A week of sorting. Kendra wiped her sweaty brow. The mines would be cooler. Except when dust storms erupted from falling rock.

"Water?" The woman beside her handed her the bucket. Already brown from dust. She choked some down. Her throat was too dry for words.

The inspector strolled by. "Any gems? Any ores?"

Kendra pointed to a few tiny rocks, and one with pretty lines on it. At least, they looked like lines in the semi darkness. Most of the rest had been passed to the next person in line.

"You better be able to recognize them by the first level, if you want to go next week." He dropped them into his collecting tins.

"I do. Will." She croaked.

He walked away.

She turned back to her job of sorting.

The older woman beside her had pointed out half of her finds the last few days.

Pain increased from the cancer. No treatment was known for it. Some doctors said there had been help once. The mines might be the best place for her. Or so they said. She had believed they meant her to go there and die.

She heard of miraculous reduction of some symptoms while working at level three. That was her goal. To reach level three and stay there as long as she could. Deeper levels paid better. Some in the deepest levels did not leave the mines. Levels three to five left only on weekends. It was too far down to return every single day.

A sharp gust of air blew through the door from the mines. The wind was followed by grit, dust, dirt, and a few coughing miners from level one.

Everyone hurried out the narrow door to stand outside and wait until the all clear was given.

"Did everyone make it out?"

"Line one," the speaker coughed, "Went to level two."

Kendra listened as people greeted each other. These people knew each other, and the dangers. Many of them were from generations of late life miners. She leaned against the wall as a spasm of pain shot through her body.

"You okay?" Travis stood beside her.

She nodded.

"Are you scared?"

Kendra smiled weakly. They'd expect her to be scared. A good cover up. Not really a lie. Her pain was too strong to speak.

"They are closing up today. Level two, and three will have to leave out the back entrance." Travis led the way back to the gate.

The back entrance. Little more than an air hole. An ancient elevator shaft that had long quit working. Used to transport supplies

down to the lower levels, and people up to the higher levels in an emergency by rope.

Kendra glanced that way. The rescue team would already be at work. "I should go help."

"No. No first week people may help."

"Are they afraid we will quit?"

He laughed as he opened the guard shack. "Perhaps. Dead bodies are often discolored and disfigured."

"I've seen dead bodies." She sat on the bench he gestured to.

"Bodies broken by tons of rock?"

"Maybe not rock."

"Or discolored and bloated by bad air?" He leaned against the door as miners stepped out of the gate.

"You mean?"

Travis held his finger to his lips.

Of course. They'd have to chat carefully here. Supervisors might be listening. Methane, radon, and mercury all had strange effects on the body. Now, they were called bad air. The names of these, and other gasses, were long forgotten. Except in books. Where they existed.

The noisy miners exited the gate.

Travis stepped outside and closed it. He didn't lock it. "Rescuers will need to be able to escape." He sat beside Kendra.

There was something she needed to tell him. Would he understand?

"Can you leave for the day?" That sounded wrong.

"Not if I want to keep my job." He smiled at her.

Her heart fluttered. If she could live. No. Trista needed someone to support her. "I don't mean like that. The rescuers may be hours."

"Or days. We can sit outside the gate." He shook his keys.

Kendra laughed. She led the way to a bench outside the gate. A place the miner's families could bring them meals, or wait for word from rescuers.

Travis sat beside her. "Surprised you didn't go home."

"My daughter isn't there." Trista was at boarding school. Learning to live without her mom.

"No other children?"

"No."

Travis moved his mouth closer to her ear. "I'll tell you a secret."

She was startled. Her own secret weighed deeply on her mind.

"I'm not supposed to be here."

Was he trying to draw a confession from her? "Are you sure you should be telling me this?"

He leaned back. "You seem nice enough. I want someone to know."

"Why?"

Travis glanced through the slatted fence gate. "I won't be here much longer."

Kendra pulled away. He could be trying to trick her into telling him her secret. "Why?"

"I'm going away. Across the water."

She covered her mouth. Nobody would see her speak. "Across the water?"

The land across the water was forbidden. Illegal. Even to speak of it, would bring serious consequences.

He nodded. "Go with me. Bring your daughter."

She stubbed her toe in the dirt. "I can't. I. Can't."

He took both of her hands in his. "I've seen you walk. I know the symptoms. I can help you."

"Really?"

He nodded. "They have books. And more. Everything we lost."

"Hush. If the bosses hear you, they may kill us."

He smiled. "No. Not me. You can read. I've been testing you."

She groaned. "You won't tell the bosses, will you?"

He laughed. "They are from across the ocean. They sometimes take people to treat them, and train them to live there."

"Some of the miners who don't return and are never heard from again?"

Travis nodded. "I'm going to college."

"College? I didn't think there were any anymore."

"Not here. Go with me? Tonight?"

"My daughter. She's at boarding school."

"I'll send for her to join us."

Kendra looked into Travis's eyes. It could be a trick. His eyes were shiny and bright, with no hint of deception. "I'll go then."

He stood. "I'll inform them, and we can leave." Travis walked back into the gate.

Kendra's heart fluttered. This went against everything she had been taught. It felt right. Safe. Safer than here.

Her daughter would have a future, where reading was legal, even if the doctors couldn't help her. She stood and hobbled to the gate.

Travis stepped out and took her arm.

They walked down the pathway toward her sleeping place to gather her few belongings.

Water Works

Lights flashed.

Crystalla closed her eyes. It hurt. It really hurt.

"Open your eyes. I have to see into them." The doctor touched her shoulder.

She tried to comply. Light hurt. Her eyes hurt, even closed they hurt.

The doctor sighed and leaned against his desk. "Nothing we can do. Retinal damage. Won't repair itself."

"I can do anything I want?"

"Most things. You have one-quarter of one eye to see out of. Once it heals. It'll take time."

"Will it become worse?"

The doctor skimmed her chart. "We don't know. All your tests are inconclusive."

"You don't know?"

The doctor closed the chart. "No idea. It could be genetic. We won't know without further tests, and insurance won't cover the tests."

"Do we need to know?" Crystalla covered her eyes with her hand.

"If you want to."

"I need to prepare for the future. Will I be blind?"

"You are legally blind. It may worsen. I don't have any other answers." He stepped to the door and opened it.

The glare outside the room burned as it pushed inward through her dilated eyes. Crystalla stood and covered her eyes with her hand. Her mother would be out there in the waiting room. Hoping for a report that she would recover. Her future depended on perfect eyesight. She stumbled to the open door.

A nurse touched her elbow. "I'll guide you." With little more than a finger behind her elbow groove, she guided Crystalla to where her mother waited.

Her mother touched her arm. She sniffled. "We'll manage." Her voice was thick with tears. No more words tumbled out. She guided Crystalla out of the building.

That evening, at home, with the curtains closed she waited for the storm. Her dream future as a surgeon wouldn't happen. She hadn't passed the vision test. The specialists had found more issues than any previous eye doctor she had been to.

Her dad sat in the empty chair at the table. "What do you plan to do?"

She expected that question from her dad. He would not ask how she was dealing with it. Even if he understood her feelings mattered.

"I'm going to research."

"No time for that. It's time for action. You have to schedule college classes in the next week."

"Dad. A week is plenty of time. Would you rather I leap without looking? This is going to be about the rest of my life. I have to plan and prepare."

"Do it already. Don't think about it. You'll think yourself into a depression." He slammed the table with his fist.

"Dad. Stop. I am going to visit the low vision clinic as soon as they have an available appointment." She groaned. He didn't know the worst, and couldn't handle it if he did.

"Have you called?"

"Yes. They are trying to find a time to work me in in the next few days." The following day, she'd have a short appointment, and a longer consultation in two weeks.

"If they don't have time?"

"I'm to take a semester off. According to the college. Until my eyes settle, I have time for the training I need, and choose a new career." A new career would be chosen. Soon.

"That'll put you behind everyone your age."

"No. I'm younger than all the students going into college this year." It wouldn't matter if she couldn't be a surgeon. There was plenty of time.

"I'm not going to allow you to sit around and mope."

"I won't."

"What do you think you're doing?"

Crystalla didn't even have to have open her eyes. His accusations were intended to be well-meaning, although they stung. "I am resting my eye. The dilation drops are painful. I have to stay in the dark for twenty-four hours. At least."

"I expect you to be out there making decisions tomorrow then."

Better to humor him. "Okay. I am going to bed to rest my eye."

"I mean what I say." Her father's voice lessened as she walked away.

He meant well. She knew that. Timing was tough to make it in society. Especially as a woman. If she wanted to have children. Not knowing if the vision loss was genetic meant she had chosen to not have children. She had already determined that. She curled up on her bed. A warm tear squeezed out of her eyes. Too much fear. Too much trouble. And all her father could think about was the future that was no longer hers. One she had not wanted.

Her mother slipped into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm here."

Crystalla nodded.

Her mother didn't need to speak for Crystalla to realize what she was thinking. Her mother worried about her. An only child. Her parent's late choice in marriage had meant they only had one child. Now, she was imperfect. Although it hurt, she'd do what she could for her daughter. Even though walking and talking was becoming increasingly difficult for her. Instead of seeing her graduate, have a career, and a family, she feared having to find a caretaker for her daughter, as well as herself.

Crystalla clinched her fists. She would find a way. A way to prove that even blind, she could lead a successful life.

Her mother sat in silence a while. She then patted the bed and left the room, closing the door gently.

The counselor at the low vision clinic recommended Crystalla go ahead and meet with the college disability team. She arrived at the college she had planned on attending. She reached the disability team office and knocked at the door.

"How can we help you today?"

She opened the door.

A man sat behind a desk pointed at a blank wall, with his right ear toward the door. "Come in."

She stepped forward and expected him to turn and look at her.

He didn't. "Sit. Are you here to help, be helped, or both?"

"You aren't even looking at me."

He laughed. "I don't hear with my eyes. Wouldn't matter if my eyes were pointed at you. They wouldn't see you. My left CI is being repaired. I have my working right CI pointed toward the door to hear."

"CI?"

"Cortical implant. It allows me to hear. What can I do to help you?"

"I failed my vision exam to be a surgeon." It was odd to realize that the man in front of her wasn't looking at her as she spoke. His perceived rudeness was the only way he could hear her.

"How much vision do you have?"

"Poor. Less than one-quarter of an eye."

"Are you looking to help others, or receive help?"

"I need a new direction. I can't be a surgeon. My disorder may be progressive."

The man tapped on his keyboard. "Tell me about yourself. What do you enjoy?"

Too many tough thoughts and emotions over the last few days. She had not wanted to be a surgeon. That had been her father's dream for her. His expectation. She preferred geology.

After several minutes of back and forth talk, the computer beeped. "A match. Water Works. Odd. They don't usually take anyone with useable vision."

"Why's that?"

"It's a tough job. In the dark. Rare to have lighting. Checking and cleaning out the drinking water lines."

"Really? Sounds like it could be automated."

"It could be. I have a few friends who do this. They enjoy it. A way to spend time without worrying about sight."

"What do I need to do?"

"I'll email you the information, and you can go by next week. They will better determine if you can do the work."

She gave him her email address and prepared to leave. "Can you see me at all?"

"You are a shadowy blur."

The following Monday her mother dropped her off at the Water Works local office. This office was one of dozens scattered across

the desert that allowed workers to stage cleaning and water safety checks.

Her guide would be Jondal. He would access her ability and comfort in the dark caverns that the drinking water pipes passed through. Jondal handed her a long cane, and showed her a few techniques for using it.

Within an hour, the brightly lit entrance was far behind her. She was deep in the underground cavern. In the beginning, she had been able to follow the gleaming white lines of pipe. One on each side of her. She unsteadily used the white cane to trace the pipe on her right-hand side.

"We'll stop here." Her guide stopped. "Reach down and feel the clean out tube."

Crystalla bent over and reached out.

"Follow your cane to the tube, then across."

She found the clean out cap.

"Turn it to the right."

"It won't explode water all over me?"

Jondal laughed. "No. It is turned off in this pipe. Though not the one on the other side of you. You can feel the difference. In addition to the hum."

There was a hum. On the left side. Crystalla reached down and opened the clean out valve. There was a loop on the tie out cap that held it to the pipe.

Over the next hour, she carefully followed Jondal's instructions for cleaning the pipe and verifying all contaminants had been removed. "There aren't many contaminants."

"No. Each pipe is cleaned once a week. We also have to verify that the slope and grade hasn't changed as the tremors affect the water lines. Tomorrow, we go to the other side of the office area. A pipe there may need repair. You'll learn to do that."

Crystalla stopped walking. "Have sighted people ever done this job?"

"Yes. They didn't like it. Too many were scared of the dark. We are used to it. Dark doesn't bother us. We have the experience and training on how to find our way, and what we need in the dark. They often don't."

"I'm partially sighted, and I don't have the training."

"You'll have it here. That's probably why they sent you here."

"My eyes are more rested today than in weeks."

"Darkness can be restorative."

She wanted to ask so many questions about so many aspects of being blind. If she didn't ask, how would she know? However, it seemed intrusive. "Can we do anything we want to?"

"Mostly. Driving and operating aren't options at this point. We can train machines to do the work for us. That would take out the human element in most jobs."

"We don't want that. I'll miss the opportunity I didn't have." Crystalla gently tapped the side line with her cane.

"You'll find new ones."

"I want to be a geologist."

"Doable. We'll go back to the office. We have a low light room where we talk about the geology involved in the Water Works tunnels." Jondal stepped around her to lead the way.

This could be a good beginning. A chance for her eyes to heal. And do the job she wanted. Not the one her father wanted for her. She smiled as she followed Jondal. He would be a good friend.

Spay and Neuter

The office waiting room was rather empty. A man sat with a dog by his side. The dog had a white muzzle and sprawled on the floor as if he had no interest in the world around him. A bulletin board in the corner was half full. The section on geriatric care of pets was covered in posters. An empty section was labelled, "Puppies and Kittens Needing a Home."

Dr. Marindell smiled. Much easier this way. Everyone had laughed when she promised the spay and neuter program would save millions of lives. Not a single kitten or puppy had been put down at an animal shelter in the entire state in over seven years. Sickly, geriatric, or aggressive, animals were the only ones whose lives had ended tragically.

Something was wrong.

"Dr. Marindell, your next patient is waiting." The receptionist nodded toward the exam room.

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Greshen with his Dachshunds."

He was a breeder whose dogs had not had puppies since she had sprayed the state with mammal contraceptive. She smiled. No more inbred dogs by incompetent breeders.

Dr. Marindell took the folder and sauntered into the exam room. "How can I help you today?"

Mr. Greshen had placed one of his older dogs on the exam table. She had had three litters before the spraying. None in the seven years since. "She has lumps on her side. She hasn't been in heat. Not in years."

Dr. Marindell examined the dog. Lumps. Many of them. They were common in geriatric animals. Usually fatty tumors. "I can test it, do surgery, or wait. Probably only fat. As long as it doesn't interfere with her walking, she should be fine."

He loaded the dog back into her crate. "I've been looking for registered pups. I haven't found any in the state. After seven years with no bred dogs, I need new stock."

"You have ten dogs."

Mr. Greshen tapped the top of the dog crate. "No. I have four left. The others have all died. Three in labor seven years ago. Their pups didn't live either. The others have tumors like she does."

"I'm sorry." Dr. Marindell stood straight and tall. This man didn't deserve dogs. They were nothing more than a paycheck for him. He had been a breeder for forty years. Until she ended it. At one point, he had had twenty female dogs, most of whom were repeat pregnant moms, many having two litters a year.

In fact, he had been one of the main breeders she had fought to sterilize. It had taken five years to develop the sterilization spray. And three months to cover the state with it using crop dusters. It had been expensive. Even by the price standards of seven years ago. Her research had saved her much time and grief over the years. No more mother dogs dying in her arms when their pups were too large to pass through birth canals. No more unwanted flea ridden cats.

Mr. Greshen trudged out the door carrying the dog crate.

Dr. Marindell set the folder down. These people would never know the misery and suffering she had saved them from.

"How many more cases today."

"One more."

The receptionist was tired of half days. She'd have to do something about that, soon, if people stopped coming to the clinic. She hurried through the last case. Another geriatric dog.

After he left, she returned to the front desk.

"Here is a woman and her daughter who want to speak to you." The receptionist smiled. "I hope you can help them."

Dr. Marindell glanced at the woman and her young daughter. "How can I help you?"

"I'm Dabney, and this is my Gelidea, my young daughter. We moved here a few months ago. She has no friends. Her brother died before he was born. Last week. I want to find her a young kitten to be her friend."

Dr. Marindell softened. She had been that little friendless girl once. It had led her to be a veterinarian. "I'm sorry. I don't know of any kittens."

"We've called everywhere. It seems there aren't any, and haven't been in a long time. Can you please contact some of your friends to help us find a kitty?"

"I'll see what I can do." She walked to her inner office.

It wouldn't hurt to check the internet. After all, it had been almost a year since the previous spraying. Or maybe less. Some of the crop dusters had begun spraying for this year in the last few weeks.

She scrolled through the pages of notices. No pets up for adoption under geriatric age for hundreds of miles. Dr. Marindell gulped. At least a few should have had litters once a year.

The search led onward. Reports of a strange chemical had seeped into waterways. Whole populations of short lived mammals had died out. Including squirrels, rats, mice, hamsters, and rabbits. Cows had died. No new calves to replace the herds of beef and milk cattle. Goats, sheep, and even lamas had stopped reproducing. Schools had closed. Few children under the age of five had been born in the state. Most under the age of five had immigrated from other countries.

Dr. Marindell gulped. The airborne sterilization chemical was only supposed to work on cats and dogs. For a year at a time. The hope had been to deplete the unwanted animals that roamed the streets.

Someone knocked at the clinic door.

She trudged to answer it.

A man flashed a badge at her.

She closed her eyes. They had caught up to her. One of the crop dusters must have turned her in.

She stepped out the door and locked it behind her.

At her trial the judge did not believe her testimony. "You destroyed our food supply. Murdered our next generation. For what?"

"I had to spay and neuter the dogs and cats for those who could not, or would not, afford it."

"Did you not realize that the chemicals would spay and neuter farm animals, and humans as well?"

"It shouldn't have." Dr. Marindell covered her face with her hands. As she did, the tear streaked faces of Dabney and Gelidea danced before her. Two women whose lives were destroyed by her choices. A mother looking forward to the birth of her son, whom did not live. A daughter looking forward to being a big sister. With not even a kitten to comfort her. "I am sorry."

"Sorry isn't good enough." The judge pounded his gavel.

Dr. Marindell wasn't listening. It wasn't good enough. It could be years, maybe decades before the farms could raise animals again. Maybe longer for people to be able to reproduce in the region again. For now, outsiders wouldn't even move here for fear of not being able to have children in the future.

Customer Satisfaction

Machines hummed, grills baked, and the sound of orders processing through the gentle words of cashiers filled Valena with pride. What had not long ago been a failing burger spot, was currently a thriving healthy restaurant. No longer did they try to keep up with hundreds of dishes and only two or three paid employees. There were two meat dishes, and five vegetables to choose from; created, served, and cleaned up by nearly twenty well-trained employees. Good healthy cooking, ready when their customers arrived.

There was a shout from beyond the cashier line.

Valena walked to the front of the restaurant.

A red-faced male gestured and almost hit a daily customer in the face.

The other customers stepped back out of the man's way.

Her place was beside her cashiers. With the flick of her wrist, she alerted the cooks to be prepared to call for help. She stepped forward to Gwendal's side.

"Little girl, my order is a quad burger with extra sauce, fries, and a triple large drink. Not anything else."

"I'm sorry sir. This restaurant is Beef and Veggie. We no longer serve burgers." Gwendal's hands shook behind the order screen.

"You'll serve what I ask for, and now. Or I'll speak to your manager."

Valena glanced at her.

Gwendal's gulp was audible. "Sir. We do not serve burgers, fries, or extra-large drinks anymore."

The man's face reddened. He reached across the counter and grabbed Gwendal by her shirt collar. "You will place my order as I placed it. Do you understand? Lazy little girl. You have no place in a business. Do your job, or I'll make your manager fire you! The customer's requests always matter first."

Even as the man made threats against her employee, Valena did not falter. She had heard of him before. Every employee, and customer, needed to know how she expected her employees to be treated. The threats were real. They would all know the results.

Valena chopped her arm across the man's forearm, forcing him to release Gwendal. That would be enough for the cooks to alert the police.

He then turned his anger on her. "I'll have you wrote up on assault charges!" His face had turned red. He might have a heart attack.

"You verbally and physically assaulted a cashier." Valena crossed her arms. "I suggest you lower your voice to a legal sound limit, well below 90 decibels, and apologize."

The man growled. "Who are you? She's just a lazy little girl who refuses to do her job. No manager would hire her. She doesn't even have the brains for this type of work. A wild animal could do better. Find the manager. I want to place my order. If you have that many brains."

Valena had seen this before. At too many places she had turned around. Violent men, and sometimes violent women, abused the employees until they couldn't function in their jobs out of fear. Verbal, physical, and often sexual abuse were aimed at employees trying to do their jobs. who could not escape from a customer's grasp. This man had crossed that dangerous line. "I am the manager."

"No wonder this little girl isn't willing to do her job."

"Sir. You will leave this establishment. This is a restaurant. We do not allow any employee here to be abused by a customer. You may leave. Now."

He backed up before he bounded toward the counter. "You girls don't have the brains to even fix a burger and fries."

The angry man turned to the other customers. "We might as well all leave. They don't have any sense. They'll be closed down in no time." He added a few choice sexual innuendoes. The man stalked toward the door.

A policeman opened the door. He held up his hand to quiet the cussing customer. "What seems to be the problem?"

Jaws dropped at the stream of words that poured out of the man's mouth.

"Disturbing the peace. That's a start. I'll take it from here." He escorted the man out of the restaurant.

There would be much to deal with in the coming days. Another lawsuit. Another judge. Another customer who would learn that abusing working people would not give him what he wanted.

"Need a break?"

Gwendal closed her eyes for a moment. "I'll try."

Valena held up her hand up to the chatter of customers. "We do not allow our employees, or customers, to be abused. All meals for those in the restaurant during the ruckus will be discounted half price." It was the least she could do for frayed nerves, and time lost.

She stepped back as the customers rushed forward.

Gwendal shook as another man approached.

If she had wanted a break, nobody would blame her.

The man glanced at Valena, then back Gwendal. "Do you mind being called young lady?"

"It's okay."

"I'd rather not call someone I don't know by their first name. Seems too forward. You handled that well. For my order." The man listed his choice of roast beef, carrots, and green beans. His voice was a little husky. Which was likely due to the tear that rolled down his cheek.

The process smoothed over. Soon the customers happily chatted while their orders were filled. It would take time. Someday, customers too would stand up to people who bullied their servers.

Valena walked back to her office to type the report of what had happened. The microphone enabled cameras had backed up the entire scene. Written words would place the case in perspective.

Future Beginnings

A Measure of Life

Albine woke early. The sun peeked over the windowsill. Barely in time to hear the rooster crow. Early enough. One more week of measurements, before he'd begin processing years of accumulated data. A chance to really live, and change his own life measurement to one of living more than existing.

After a breakfast of freshly gathered and scrambled eggs, he pulled out his laptop to review his client for the day.

A young woman name Dorianna. A nice name. By the name, he pictured her as a healthy woman who would be busy on a farm, possibly milking cows at the moment. It was a good name for a farm woman.

Next, he reviewed her life facts. No farm. Not even a pet mentioned. She worked for a media company in the city, and had two children. Emelie was thirteen and Henri eleven. Her address was a semi-local suburb.

Albine glanced at his clock. They should be rising any time. He called her home phone. No answer. He prepared to meet her at her home after breakfast as planned.

He ambled outside to his rose garden. Dorianna should be a delightful person. A yellow rose would suit her name. He cut two and placed them in a travel vase for her and her daughter.

He arrived at her home an hour later. No car in the drive. He walked up the door and knocked. No answer. The neighborhood was silent. No cars. No people. No children playing as the summer sun began to climb to midday.

He checked the time. It was 9 am. Time to be awake and going. He called Dorianna's cell phone.

"Hello?" Lots of noise and static made the conversation difficult.

"Hello Dorianna. I'm here to see you."

"You are? Where are you?"

Albine glanced around at the emptiness of the neighborhood. Different from the noisy farm he lived on. "At your home."

She laughed. "I'm at work. Have been for three hours. You'll have to meet me here. I have three meetings in the next hour. I'll try to squeeze a few minutes in to talk to you."

Albine was supposed to shadow her day for a few days to measure her life and be sure her life work balance was healthy. "I'll be there soon." He closed the connection and checked her work address. Nearly an hour drive away. Once the distance data was entered on her Measuring chart, he walked to his car and began the drive of her daily commute.

Traffic was terrible. Dozens of stop lights that only allowed two or three cars through them at a time. People raced through the red lights, preventing the next road from going when they should. A dozen turns, and road name changes before he reached his destination.

Exhausted, he pulled into a pay parking garage and parked. Albine's hands shook as he picked up the tablet. More notes to add to Dorianna's Measuring chart. There were hundreds of points against her life and health before he even met her in person.

Albine walked to the front of the building indicated by her. He tried to open the door. It was locked. Beside the door was a set of instructions to ring for a guard if he didn't have an employee card. He sighed. More points tilting her life out of balance.

A guard arrived at the door. "Your name?"

"Albine."

The guard pulled up a pad. "Who are you here to see?"

"Dorianna is expecting me."

The guard grunted. "One minute. We only allow three visitors in the building at a time. You will have to wait until one of those here leaves."

Albine tucked the roses into his belt loop. He made another note on his pad. He looked for a bench to sit on and relax. There was none. No birds to listen to. No grass to rest his feet in. The sky could barely be seen between the buildings.

After a while, the door opened and a man strode out.

The guard ushered Albine in. "Dorianna will see you during her lunch break. Do you know where her office is?"

"No, I don't. Sorry."

The officer locked the door. "This way."

After an elevator ride to the tenth floor, the guard stepped off the elevator. He escorted Albine to a tiny, cluttered office outside a busy waiting area.

Albine knocked at the open doorway.

Dorianna looked up. "I have twenty minutes for lunch. A fellow worker gave me her lunch break."

Albine blinked. Twenty minutes wasn't enough to gulp a liquid lunch, and certainly not enough to rest the brain. Ten minutes wasn't anything. Barely a breath. He tried to hand her the roses.

Dorianna marked papers without looking up. "Tell me what you need to measure my life."

He set the yellow roses on the desk in front of her. "We need to talk about your schedule. I should meet with your children, Emelie and Henri as well."

She laughed. "Unlikely. They go to before school activities, school, after school activities, and late-night sports. They don't have time for talking. As for me. Here is a copy of my typical day." She handed him a schedule. Filled full from 3 am to 10pm.

"What about weekends? Do you relax then?"

"No time. Have to take care of the house, yard, take the kids to more sports, and try to squeeze in a little reading, if there is time."

A knock at the door startled him. Another woman stood there.

"Time's up. I have to go back to work."

"You haven't eaten."

She stood and gazed down at him. "Lunch is to drink something. No one has time to eat. Good day." She glanced at the yellow roses. A smile half formed on her lips as the other woman pushed past her. She snatched them up.

He took the schedules she had given him and went downstairs.

Time to put his own life back in balance. On his farm.

The following day, he was at home. It would take a year to balance the life measurements of dozens of people he had gathered. Most were much like Dorianna. Too busy racing around that they wouldn't know a rose if he handed them one. Or have time to smell it.

Prince Charming

The castle tour had been fascinating. All the stairs, hidden rooms, and much more. Della had explored them with her husband Owen. The time had come for the event she had waited for. Longed for. Dreamed of since childhood.

Meeting Prince Charming. She would have a few moments of his time. What would she say? Would words even happen? They were rare. Even Owen only heard a few words from her a day.

Owen wandered over to a bench to rest. It had been a long hike up three floors to the ramparts.

Della smiled. It wouldn't be long.

She ambled over to a large flower bed before the rampart walls. Della rested her shoulders on the high stone barrier, and peeked through daffodils and tulips to view the stream meandering in the valley below. That stream ran between several colorful tulip farms. Birds sang, and fresh scents danced on a gentle breeze.

Prince Kendrick walked up beside her. "Hi."

She smiled at him.

He didn't make an effort to speak more. He leaned on the wall, and peered out at the beauty below. His hands had seen no hard labor.

She lifted her hand. Della sensed the softness of his clothes without moving closer.

All too soon it was over. Her few moments alone with Prince Charming at the top of a castle wall.

Princess Wildona arrived with Princess Gabby, age four, and Prince Camden, age three, in tow.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Princess Wildona walked up beside her.

Della nodded.

Princess Gabby pulled at Della's pant leg. "Do you talk? Can you tell me a story?" Her pleading eyes rarely went unanswered.

Della nodded. Words were too difficult to find. They danced around. If any tumbled out, they might be wrong. She might be laughed at.

Prince Camden attempted to climb the rock wall.

Della put her hand out to stop him.

Prince Kendrick grabbed his adventurous son. "You know better."

Princess Wildona clasped the hands of both children and turned to walk away.

It was her final chance. "Thank you." The words struggled from Della's brain, to her mouth, and choked themselves out.

Prince Kendrick lightly brushed her shirt sleeve. As if he too preferred not to speak. He joined his wife and children.

Owen returned and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

She looked into his eyes and knew that he was an equal to Prince Kendrick any day. Without a castle, and all this beauty, of course.

She clasped her heart. A memory built which would survive a lifetime.

A Fair Beginning

The door slid shut on the tiny apartment. A big enough place for a single man.

Kelvine whistled. If all went as planned, he'd be moving soon. To a place of his own choosing. A larger place, with the wife who had chosen him. Nadine Trilleon. A perfect woman worthy of the best any man could offer.

He dropped his jacket carefully on the couch. A bachelor for four years, the auditor would expect some mess. It seemed wrong. That dropped jacket nagged at him as he boiled two eggs.

His phone buzzed.

It was Stanlan. His childhood friend, whom he had been trying to distance himself from for four years. Especially since the last several audits had found serious problems in Stanlan's finances.

It rang again.

If he didn't answer, Stanlan might show up. Not good with the auditor due any moment.

"Hi Stanlan. What do you need today?" Not a nice choice of words. Although, it did seem he demanded more than he shared.

"I need money. Can you pick me up tonight? I didn't have enough gas money to drive to work."

Kelvine closed his eyes. Yes, he had the money. He wasn't sharing. If Nadine had asked, he would share with her. She, however, was much like Kelvine, and already had plenty of money saved for everything they might need.

"I've none to spare today."

"Can you stop by and pick me up anyway?"

"Ask me later." Kelvine hung up. Hopefully Stanlan would be able to convince someone to take him home.

He rinsed the dishes and set them in the drainer.

Kelvine picked up the packet of carefully lined and documented receipts. Every penny he had earned and spent in the last six months was accounted for. As would be expected by the auditor.

His hands shook as he set the packet on the table. He was still under the scrutiny of the new adult monitors. If the auditor was happy, this would be his final audit. The rest of his life would be

unaudited. No one would care how much he made. Or how he spent it. Or, if he had money for retirement.

The doorbell rang.

Kelvine opened the door. "Hello Ms. Binsey. Good to see you again." He waved her in.

"You are ready to be totally on your own I guess?" She strode right in and examined the living area.

"Yes. I plan to marry soon. And move to a family apartment."

Ms. Binsey rubbed her hand across a bookshelf and checked for dust. Her glove stayed clear. Not even a stray hair. "Your soon to be wife has as good of an audit as you, I hope?"

"Yes. She had her final audit yesterday."

Ms. Binsey smiled. She light heartedly shook her finger at the dropped coat. Then, she walked into the bedroom and checked it. "No mess. Bedding at 99%."

As if anyone received 100% on the bedding being tucked in tightly.

"You have a nice box here."

"Yes. Collecting sheets, blankets, and curtains for the new apartment."

Ms. Binsey passed him and entered the bathroom. She checked under the sink, the tub, and the toilet rim. "Very clean. Are you sure your future wife didn't clean it for you?"

Kelvine held his hands up in front of his face. "No. That would be cheating. I have to pass on my own."

She laughed. "I've known a few who asked their future wives to clean for their final inspection."

"I can't lie."

She lifted an eyebrow. "I think you can."

He gulped. No. No intentional lies. His parents had given him an early wedding gift. He had forgotten to write it in the ledger.

She stepped into the kitchen and opened the ledger.

Kelvine sat. He had to wait while she examined his last six months of new adulthood. If he passed today, he would be a legal adult. If not, he'd try again in six months.

It would almost be easier to try again. Safer. A safety net he needed. New adulthood was a time when food, clothing, retirement fund, transportation, and healthcare were entirely provided for.

Even his rent had been paid, as long as he participated in work, social activities, and showed good money management skills.

All that would cease as of tonight.

If he passed.

He longed to do something. Anything that would prevent it. Another six months of all expenses paid would save even more for his later years.

Kelvine clenched his fist. Except, Nadine, and his parents, would be angry if he threw everything away. She might even decide not to marry him, and break off their engagement.

"What is this note beside Stanlan's name?"

Kelvine peeked at it. "Don't expect it back."

Ms. Binsey pushed the ledger to the center of the table. She put her hands together and turned her full attention to him. "Are you telling me you have a friend you can't trust?"

"He has been my friend all my life."

"Human nature says he'll borrow more from you once you pass."

"No. I said no to him today. And every time for the previous month. I won't help him anymore."

"How much does he owe you?"

The room spun. How much? "Over the past six months?"

"Sure."

He pulled the ledger to him and added Stanlan's borrows. "He owes me $225.00."

"And over your lifetime?"

Kelvine turned away. "I haven't kept track."

"You do understand the importance of his learning to succeed on his own?"

Kelvine could lose everything. He nodded before dropping his head on the table.

"Look at me."

He lifted his head.

His phone rang.

Stanlan again.

"Answer it."

"Hi Stanlan." His hands shook almost as much as his voice.

"You have to pick me up today. I'll lose my apartment if I don't pay the rent. They called and said I hadn't paid in four months. I

thought my parents covered it. They have all four years. They promised they would."

Kelvine gulped. Not something Ms. Binsey should hear. Stanlan should have been in the new adult program, and had no major expenses, other than food. His serious audit failures had caused strict reimbursement instead. "I can't. I'm busy today. You do have the money, don't you?"

"Goodness, no. That's why my parents promised to pay it. There isn't enough money each month for rent, parties, and flying out to visit my girlfriends."

"I don't have a penny to spare."

"Sure you do. How much do you spend on your girlfriends each week?"

That was easy. "I have one girlfriend. We typically spend about ten dollars a week on entertainment. This week, we intend to spend double that. Tickets are already bought."

"Guess you don't have anything either then. I'll have to try to reach my parents again. Maybe they can send the rent. And a few hundred more. I want to go visit my girlfriends. Oh, and pay someone to work my shift. I don't know where they are. They haven't answered the phone since my failed audit three days ago." Stanlan hung up.

"You shouldn't have heard that. I am sorry." Kelvine set the phone down.

Ms. Binsey reached across the table and touched his phone. "Is this common?"

"Yes. We have plans to move to another city. And change my phone number so he can't find us."

"Do you only spend ten dollars a week on entertainment?"

"Of course. We keep it simple to save money. We go to lots of places that provide free entertainment. Walks are always nice."

Ms. Binsey closed her eyes. "Stanlan doesn't wear off on you at all?"

"Oh no. Absolutely not. He will be homeless and jobless because he didn't keep up with his accounts. He kept failing his audits."

"Promise me something."

"I'll have to ask what it is first."

"Don't forget to live while saving for the future."

"What?"

"Don't forget to have a little fun. Spend a little on yourself. Stanlan is one extreme. You are the opposite extreme. In fact, I should fail you."

"Please don't. It would disappoint my parents. My wife to be."

"Your wife to be has had the same discussion with her auditor."

"Auditor discussions are not discussed with others."

Ms. Binsey smiled. "Oh, you think they aren't. They are. You both need a lesson. I'm putting you both on probation for three months. I expect you both to spend ten dollars a week on yourselves, and ten dollars per person, on each outing before I will grant you full adult status."

"You mean, I don't pass?"

"You took the book too literal. You need to find a middle ground. Relax. Enjoy life." She stood and walked to the front door.

Kelvine followed.

She turned back to him. "And don't try to cover up life by a jacket so carefully placed on the couch I know it is not where you want it, or normally leave it. Your future healthcare providers will thank me." She opened the door and walked out of the apartment.

He closed and locked the door.

He trudged to the couch and sank into the deep cushions. Three months. Time to adjust and relax. What would he do?

He pulled on his jacket. Spend ten dollars on himself? On something he didn't need? That had not been done. Not without a good cause.

Outside on the sidewalk Nadine waited on a bench. The fear in her eyes mirrored his own feelings.

Ten dollars. Could they count it if they spent it on each other? Probably not. He sighed and touched her hand.

She joined him to stroll down the sidewalk.

The zoo was nearby. It was free for all to visit. Perhaps the shops would have been a better choice. No. They could always try tomorrow. Talk about it and choose what to buy. Or, what to save for.

The afternoon, and their future, awaited.

Glass Houses

The sky clouded over.

It wasn't rain time. The dome over their village would protect them from unscheduled weather. Qualella carried her basket of garden produce.

Reshinda ran up to her. "Momma. I've chosen."

"Who have you chosen?" This would be Reshinda's first child. A blessing. And a curse. Her twin brother would soon be forced to move outside the dome.

"Braith. He has the same color eyes. I'll go to his home tonight."

Qualella laughed. "He leaves for the outside soon. Half the young women your age have chosen him."

"Doesn't mean all of them were successful. I have to try. The timing is right."

"Go then. I suppose your brother should have a visitor soon."

"I hope so. People believe being male, and second born, he isn't any good. He is though. He is as strong as me. He'll do fine beyond the dome. The men will train him." Reshinda ran off to make preparations to spend the night with Braith.

Hopefully, it would be fruitful. Qualella joined her mother, Perlema, in the council house.

"Has Perry had any visitors?" Perlema pushed her work aside to make room for Qualella.

"No. Reshinda is going to her first tonight. With Braith. She thinks it will be successful."

"A good choice."

"Do you think Perry can stay another season? He deserves a chance. He works well in the garden." Reshinda tore apart a piece of cloth to be reused as a fire starter rag.

"He is close to the cut off in age. The men might allow another year. I intend to go beyond the dome with him."

"Mother. You mustn't!"

"I must. I am the one chosen to see if it is safe for women to live out there, on the planet's surface." Perlema closed her eyes. "I want to go. I want to take my grandson with me. However, I want to give him a chance to create a child. You must speak to Reshinda's friends. We only have a month left."

"We can have a gathering reminding all the young women about which young men leave this year. I don't want to lose you."

"I am the oldest woman here. You will lead."

"I can't be next in line."

"I waited long, too long to choose to have you. I will go. I want to see the animals that don't live in the dome. I want to taste deer meat. I want the dreams of my mother. And her mother."

"Out there is scary. Beyond the dome. We don't know if the land is safe for women. The toxins may still be in the air and the spoil. What have men become without women in their daily lives?"

"We see their faces from time to time. They gaze in."

"With a scary hunger. I fear it. I fear the time of the dark days. The reasons they hid us in the domes."

"It is time. Soon, villages will lose their domes. We may live out there, among those trees and birds we occasionally see. Gardens grow good with climate control. Some will stay. The sick, the elderly. For now. Until the glass can no longer withstand the weather out there. I am ready to go. To be sure it is safe to raise families again."

Qualella's hands focused on the familiar work while her mind raced. Her mother would leave the safety of the dome. The only home she had ever known. She would have to give up Perry to the men beyond the dome. As all young men were given up. She would have her daughter, and hopefully her daughter's child to comfort her through the cooler weather of winter.

Perhaps her daughter's child would grow up outside the dome. Too soon. Too soon.

Finally Family

Steam poured from the building in front of Tarema. Two more days. Almost retirement and family time.

"Hurry up. You aren't retired yet." Gardenia yelled at her.

"Remember those words. Someday, in a generation and a half, you'll be me." The steam continued to rise. Tarema's temporary boss could wait. Employment double generation was almost over. The person she had trained to replace her was ready. Another woman, thirty-five years before finally family.

The younger woman laughed. "I'll be looking forward to it as much as you. I only held my baby for five minutes. Will I ever see her again? It's been two years."

"We aren't supposed to know."

"I know." Gardenia looked her in the eye. "That's what bothers me. It isn't right. Breaking those bonds before they form. Never knowing your mom, or dad. Growing up with elderly parents who can't tell you who you are. If they even know. Mine died before I finished school. I didn't like it."

Tarema touched Gardenia's arm. "They didn't hurt you, did they?"

"No. They treated me with more respect than anyone can imagine. Is it true what they taught us in school? Is that really why?"

School. Finally family time occurred at age sixty. She hadn't been to school in over forty years. Did they still teach the same reasons? "What did they teach you?"

"They believed it would promote acceptance if all children were taken from their parents, and raised by the retired population. At my age, we are in limbo. Waiting."

"True. That's part of what they taught."

Gardenia pulled her away from the incoming workers. "I wanted to be a doctor. I ended up here instead. They said I couldn't be a doctor before my baby was born. Only men could study to be a doctor."

"I didn't want to be a doctor. A nurse maybe."

"And you didn't?" Gardenia pulled her down to the bench.

"No. The locked files bothered me."

"I've researched in those files. What they teach in school is part of the problem. Something about chemicals. The chemicals we work with."

"I don't want to know." Tarema pulled away.

"You have to know. We need it out in the open. People need to make choices again."

"We have choices."

Gardenia laughed. "No. Everything is decided for us. You can't even choose the mother of the child you will raise. She was already chosen for you. Did you choose Jerind as a husband?"

"I better go inside." Tarema pulled away. Was Gardenia correct? Had their whole lives been plotted for them? By whom? She had chosen Jerind, hadn't she?

That evening, on the long walk home, she anticipated her final day of employment. Soon, she would have family. The young woman whose child would become hers was due to give birth any day.

Jerind had retired three days ago. He had been busy preparing the nursery for the new arrival.

Tarema opened the door.

Jerind smiled. "Rachalena has arrived. She was brought here a few minutes ago. You will retire tonight."

"I'll miss my retirement party."

"Doesn't matter. She's here. See the child we will raise. We are finally a family." He led her to the nursery.

Rachalena. A birth mother's one gift to a child was her name. The child appeared perfect. Not hers though.

Tarema's heart ached for the little boy she had held forty years ago. The little boy she would never know if he had grown up, or who had raised him. Had he even grown up on this continent?

She turned away. Did all mothers feel this way when they finally saw the child they would raise, nearly two decades after giving up their own?

Jerind hugged her. "It isn't too bad. It will be okay. She must not know."

"Don't you wish you knew who our son was?"

Tears sparkled in his eyes. "As much as I wish I knew who my mother and father were."

The baby cried.

Tarema stepped back. Her fingers were permanently bent and damaged from a generation of factory work. Could they care for a baby? A newborn? She'd drop her.

"There is a bottle prepared for her. Go on." Jerind waited. “We’ve watched our older friends become finally family. We can do it."

Tarema ambled to the kitchen. Her thoughts roared around her. The only thing she had wanted for two entire generations. To be a mother. Now that the child was here, her fears surfaced. She had watched the woman who mothered her fade out of life in her own birth decade. She felt too old to mother. Would she too quickly fade?

Jerind followed her into the kitchen. "We will. Rachalena must never know our pain."

Tarema gulped. Or her fear. He too must feel it.

He put his hand on hers. "Together. Finally family."

A Future We Won't Remember

Second Place

Running feet, shouting voices, and giggles sounded out of sight, behind the closed door of the community center. Maria pulled back from the steps. If only her mom had lived. Or, society hadn't changed. She could live alone, and inherit her mom's home after her father died.

"Hurry Maria. We have to complete the ceremony before we go in." Karen waved her up the steps. "Are you ready?"

"Does it matter? I agreed." Maria turned to look at James. Yes, he would do. He would be a good husband and co-provider. He would make a good father, and Karen a good mother. "James do you agree to take me as your co-provider wife, and Karen as your primary wife?"

"I do." James took Karen's right hand with his right hand. He reached his left hand for Maria's left hand. "Karen, do you take me for your husband, while agreeing to be my primary wife?"

Karen smiled up into his eyes. "I do. Your home, garden, and children will be well cared for." She then stretched her left hand to take Maria's right hand. "Maria, do you accept James as your husband, and I as your homemaker, to be a friend and mother to your children?"

That's not quite the way it's supposed to be said. Seconds left to back out. Maria debated her answer. "I do. We'll inform our families."

The door swung open. Children huddled behind the door and giggled. They always did watch private solemn events. Many didn't have the concept of privacy.

Laughter boomed down the hallway. "You rushed to marry to inherit your mom's homestead."

James laughed.

Karen waved her arms while holding onto both James and Maria.

Small kids from the village ran under and around them.

A few years in the future, Jason and Maria's children would scamper and play around Karen, while she and Jason were off on business trips.

Society had decreed that it took three adults to economically raise a family. It was a way to decrease the future generations, while giving the current generations descendants they could depend upon. Somehow, it didn't seem fair to expect Karen to raise the children, and clean their home while they worked. It would be a long, tedious, painful life for her best friend.

In some families, the stay at home spouse did have the children, and the career spouse didn't. Maria wished that had been possible for their trio. She definitely did not want children. Only a career. She would have to bear the pain of childbirth, for the freedom of a career. It was the one option that was best for her from a social viewpoint.

Karen's family had been sent to the sterilization clinics due to inheritable disorders. Even as a toddler, she had always known she would have to be without a child of her own.

Karen had always been her best friend. The more impulsive and friendly, easy going person. She and Jason needed her to raise a healthy child or two. If her best friend had not been sterilized, she could have given birth to the children, and stayed home, while Karen worked elsewhere, and sent support money back to them. Away from children.

The children followed Maria to the back door to view the house and garden she would run. A quiet forgotten garden. A large house. Three bedrooms for adults, and two extra bedrooms for children. Her best friend would spend the next year remodeling it, and cleaning it up for the trio's first child.

Maria walked up to her and put her hand on her friend's shoulder. "You'll make it perfect. Mother always liked you." She grimaced as a child at Karen's feet squirmed and giggled.

"What will your dad do, with both your mom and uncle gone?" Karen tied a kid's shoe.

"He has a sister somewhere. I haven't met her. He is going there. Come back in and eat a meal with the family." She glanced at the house. Most of the children were outside. It should be quieter at the reception in the community center.

A year later, Karen held Maria's hand.

Maria gave birth to the trio's first child. Maria refused to look at, or name the infant. It didn't matter. Her best friend and husband

would raise the child. She hadn't even stepped into the nursery room. She had no intention of doing so.

Karen took the child from Maria to the well-planned nursery. She sang to the wrapped bundle of sound, fists, and flailing feet.

Within days, Maria was off on a scientific survey trip. The pregnancy had given her much trouble. Even with the help of Karen and James. She didn't miss the tiny bundle.

Karen sighed. Her body ached from the painful pregnancy. There should be one more to complete their family. In a year or two. It was time to recover by throwing herself into her work. As far away from the home with the crying infant as possible.

Cycle

The calendar beeped. Andrea pushed the button again. Three days until winter awakening began. Four days before her husband would wake. Then, they would have a blissful month together before she must sleep while he was awake.

Her hand dropped. Andrea tried to rememorize every line of his face. She had changed some during this waking. Her mind bubbled. Her body begged and hoped for the future. She could barely manage the last few days of receptionist work while she waited to hold her husband once again.

Infant Glenna giggled. She looked like Evan. Andrea sighed with anticipation of the month before them. Evan had said she was his sister's child. A sister Andrea hadn't met due to conflicting sleep cycles.

Trindel walked over and touched the baby's hand. Her eyes were full of tears. She was five, and would soon begin visiting the Sleep House when she drew her allotted season to sleep.

Andrea reached out and touched her hand. "You okay."

The young girl pulled away and didn't look at her mother.

"Dad will be here soon. Does that make you happy?"

The girl nodded.

"Go on and play with Sammy then." Sammy was two years younger. It'd be several years before he would have to go to the Sleep House.

Andrea smiled. Most families were allowed two children. Occasionally, a child who only had one parent would spend their parent's sleep cycle with another family. However, if she could become pregnant again, she'd be allowed to stay awake for another whole year. She'd definitely be there for Trindel's first sleep cycle.

Saturday, she walked into the cold building. The Sleep House. How she dreaded coming here. Even the beeps and moans echoing down the hallway longed for an escape.

An orderly wheeled the covered hospital bed into a private chamber.

Andrea stepped inside, and took Evan's hand. The sleep medicine had been turned off a few minutes before. She enjoyed this time. A time to observe him, and wonder what he dreamed of in

his sleep, and if he remembered his dreams. She also wondered what he thought when he watched her wake.

Groans crept through the wall from the next chamber. Someone without a partner or family to take them home. They would have to be fully awake before they could leave.

Evan's eyes fluttered. He peered deep into her eyes and squeezed her hands.

She smiled at him.

He opened his mouth.

Andrea held a glass of water with a straw for him.

He sipped at the water. "Hi."

"Oh Evan, it's been a busy summer. I'll be glad to have you home."

He smiled, unable to speak much as the sleep medicine drained from his muscles and body.

The orderly plodded in and checked his monitors. "He'll be ready to go in a few minutes."

There wasn't much to say. Words would follow later, in the privacy of their apartment.

The orderly returned to unhook Evan from the monitors. With the orderly's help, Evan stood and wobbled.

It was always like this. The first few steps were difficult. Stumbling around, and vision still cloudy. Most people were fine by the time they reached the Sleep House doors.

Andrea reached for his arm to guide him along.

He seemed to relax once they were outside. All of the medicine gone from his body at last.

She smiled, and pulled him towards the apartment.

"No. I want a good meal, how about the buffet?"

"It was closed last week. I fixed a good meal. It will be ready when we arrive. Come on."

"You didn't leave the stove on, did you?"

"No. It was almost cooked before I left. I turned it off and left the residual heat. Hurry up."

He allowed her to pull him along. Normally, he was in a hurry to go home. Not this time. They had been together for a few years, or maybe double that, depending on the way you counted time between sleep cycles. Five months asleep, seven months awake,

makes it difficult to keep track of time, and certainly age. Did age even matter anymore?

"Andrea, I want to go see my sister." Evan pulled away.

"I haven't met her. Shall I go with you?"

"No. Her wake day was yesterday. She'll be waiting for me." He pulled away and hurried down a street between high rise buildings.

Andrea gazed down the narrow street. Nothing like this had happened before.

A nurse from the Sleep Home strode up to her. "Did he leave you?"

She turned to her. "I don't know what happened. He's always wanted to hurry home and be alone together. I had a wonderful weekend planned."

The nurse smiled. "We'll talk." She led Andrea back to the Sleep Home. Once inside she led her down to a conference room.

Andrea sat in the single chair.

The nurse sat across from her.

"Did he tell you anything?"

"No. Nothing."

The nurse sighed and put her head in her hands.

The nurse knew something. A few people had disabilities which prevented them from the five months of sleep time per year. They were generally relegated to work the Sleep Houses, since the duties were light.

"What is it?" Andrea squeezed her hands. It couldn't be. No. The nurses were not permitted to share anything they heard in the recovery, or drifting off rooms.

The nurse reached across the table. "Did he tell you about the baby?"

"She is his sister's. I haven't met her."

The nurse shook her head. "He has no sister. No family."

"What?" Her heart pounded. Evan had been there for her since her waking day when she was eighteen. He had whisked her away from her parent's home days before he had to enter his sleep cycle.

"No. Glenna belongs to a woman who is awake on his awake cycle."

"That isn't allowed." Andrea pulled her hands away. "He loves me. We have Trindel and Sammy. They need a second parent."

"Ask them about Glenna."

"I would never. Why would Evan lie to me?"

The nurse pushed a button. Soothing music entered the room.

Andrea sat. They would sedate her if they had to. True, these types of issues had happened before. Though rare, they did occur.

"We need to speak to Trindel."

"She's not ready for another year."

The nurse closed her eyes. "Occasionally, when this happens, the sleeper wakes up and decides to put it in the past. Evan didn't. He has gone to find his new love. We have to find him. Trindel would know."

"No. That's not right." Andrea shook. How many lies? Her daughter had been alone with a man she had called father for five months. Was she safe?

"You know who it is anyway. You have everyone's DNA."

The nurse sat back. "True. We do. However, she is in hiding. She did not arrive for her sleep cycle. We must find her. Evan would know where she is. And Trindel."

"Trindel, Sammy, and Glenna are at the Children's Center in our apartment complex. I have to go to them." Andrea pulled away and opened the door.

"I'll send a guard."

Andrea ran out of the building. The lighting on the street was grey. Her tears blinded her. Eyes hurt. She sat on a bench beside the apartment building where she had lived with Evan since her eighteenth birthday.

"Are you Andrea?"

Andrea looked up. A tall and thin man peered down at her. "Who are you?"

"The nurse at the Sleep Home sent me."

Andrea nodded. "I have to check on my children. Find a safe place for them before my next sleep cycle."

"Will they have the same cycle as you?"

"They are too young to be in the lottery." Andrea stood. The walk to the front door, though a few hundred feet, dragged as if for miles.

The door weighed more than anything she had opened before. She walked inside the dim interior. The Children's Center was off to the right. The entire right side of the whole apartment building. The place where the young children played and learned while their awake parent worked.

She opened the inner door.

The primary teacher ran up to her. "Evan was here without you. He said you wanted to see Glenna, and not Sammy or Trindel."

Andrea's hand hit her chest. "Are Trindel and Sammy here?"

"I'll bring them." The teacher glanced at her, and then at the guard, before hurrying through an inner door.

Sammy ran out.

The teacher returned. Her face was pasty pale. "Trindel is gone."

"She's my daughter." Andrea slouched into a chair.

The teacher touched her hand.

Sammy grabbed at her knee.

The guard gazed at the screen on the wall in the waiting area. "She left after Evan did." He pointed.

Sure enough, there on the screen, Evan walked out with baby Glenna. Then, Trindel followed.

"We have to find them." Andrea pulled Sammy close to her. "Do you know where they are?"

Sammy stuck his thumb in his mouth.

"I'll keep him safe." The teacher placed her hand on his back and led him through the door.

Andrea sniffled. "I raised Glenna for six months. He didn't say a word the whole month we had together before his sleep cycle."

The guard nodded. "They rarely do. They believe they can keep up two lives. Something changed. We have to find them. All of them."

Andrea pulled herself up. "Trindel mentioned something about a new restaurant they ate with Evan at shortly before my last wake cycle."

"A good place to start. I'll be monitoring my radio."

Andrea hurried out of the building and down a street. "Where was it? Couldn't be too far if they took the baby and Sammy seven months ago."

Down three long blocks. A right turn. Down two blocks. Across the street. A tiny restaurant sat separate from the skyscraper buildings behind it. A tiny forgotten relic in a world that had built over top of them.

"Wait." The guard grabbed her hand. "You think that is the place?"

Andrea nodded. "Schellepoes Grill." The name matched.

The guard said something into his radio. "Go quietly. Wait inside the door. That building isn't what it looks like."

Andrea opened the door and stepped inside. She gasped. It was a restaurant. Larger on the inside than the outside. As if the old building had been swallowed up and enclosed inside the building towering behind it. "I."

"Shh."

The guard led her to a wait station. "You stay here." He stepped behind the counter and studied the screens.

People moved all around her.

Diners ate.

Waiters ran between the tables.

A man with a woman cooed over a baby. Wait. That man was Evan. The baby had to be Glenna.

She bumped into someone. Andrea looked over and down. Trindel crouched under the wait table. The girl held her finger to her lips.

"Guard."

The guard turned toward her.

"He's there with the woman and the baby. The woman has a red dress on."

"You better leave." The guard grabbed his radio.

"I'll have to take Glenna back, won't I?"

Trindel moved out and took her hand. "You have to. She's lived her whole life with us."

"For now. Wait here." The guard signaled two other guards and strode toward the table.

Andrea could not watch the man she had married be arrested in this restaurant. Or the woman who disobeyed the law and did not take her sleep cycle. She turned away.

Trindel sat silently beside her. "I couldn't tell you. I wasn't sure."

"It's okay." Andrea stood strong and waited.

A waitress walked over with baby Glenna. "You are to take her?"

Andrea accepted the baby she had raised for six months as her niece.

Trindel touched the forehead of her half-sister.

Too many people on the planet. Too many in the city. If people kept flouting the laws, the sleep cycles wouldn't be enough. A third

child was one, or maybe two, too many, if they wanted the planet to survive.

She pulled the baby tight against her chest. She had less than a month to find someone to care for the children during her upcoming five-month sleep cycle. It had to be enough time.

Better Forgotten Memories

Michael Hilbrunt packed his notepad and pen into his usual laptop case. This interview would be different. James Alden, at age 95, had no interest in electronics. He didn't even knowingly allow them onto his property. Michael sighed. Don't mention the computer in the car, he reminded himself. They all have that now.

He peered up at the bank of computer screens on his wall. All the knowledge of the world at his fingertips. This interview might bring forgotten knowledge that even these screens could not access. Knowledge of southern ranch life. A time almost forgotten. Some said better forgotten.

Even the bad must be remembered, so it wouldn't be repeated. A memory of an ancestor's words scrolled through his mind. "Don't allow the bad to be idolized."

It would be easy. Too easy to be swayed into the past, thinking it was normal. That was the problem with some of the few remaining relics of the past. Idolization of a time which was never right for any, other than a few white males.

His arm contrasted with the pale door as he strode toward it. Would this man even speak to him, if he realized Michael wasn't a white man like him? There had once been powders he could wear on such assignments to pass. It was August. He might pass as a well-tanned ranch hand. If they still used that term.

A few hours later, he pulled up in front of the ranch house. He parked in the circular drive. His electronic-less laptop bag was light for this interview.

A group of young adults sat on the chipped porch in swings, and chairs. They fanned their faces with cardboard.

Michael walked up to the group sitting on the paint specked steps. "I'm here to interview James Alden."

A young man fanned his face without opening his eyes. "In the door. Down the hall. Last room on the right. He's cranky."

"Always cranky." A young woman in a nursing outfit leaned forward.

Michael stepped up to the door.

"Take him a glass of sweet tea from the hallway. No ice. He can't abide it. I'll be in to look after him shortly." The nurse sipped iced tea out of a plastic cup. At least, it appeared to be tea.

Michael stepped through the open door. A table was next to another doorway. It held a silver serving tray, a pitcher of tea, and one smudged glass. Above, framed on the wall was a card of S&H Green Stamps with one open space.

After he poured the glass of tea, he walked to the room James Alden lived in.

The man was propped up by pillows in a four-poster bed. Scattered around him were old comic books and vintage toy vehicles.

"I brought you some tea."

The man glanced up from a comic. He motioned. "Come in and sit. If you have time for a chat. Maybe a game of cards."

Michael stepped closer. "I have time to listen." He handed the man the glass of tea. He peered out the open window before he sat in the overstuffed chair beside the bed.

The man sipped his tea with his eyes closed. He thumped the glass down on the wooden table beside the bed. "If you need a blanket, I have a blanket closet over there."

"I'm comfortable." It was rather warm, at over a hundred degrees outside.

"The fan makes it too cool these days. My nurses complain they are too hot. As if that's a bad thing." James Alden laughed. "What stories do you want me to tell you?"

"What life was like when you grew up." Michael pulled out his pencil and notepad. He struggled for a moment figuring out how best to write, balancing it on his knees.

"I grew up like everyone. Except for the girls, of course. They had to keep their dresses pretty and unsoiled. They didn't work. They cooked and sewed. Some read, although it was discouraged. Not feminine at all." James stacked his comic books into a pile. "I remember every one of these. See this stain?"

Michael peered at the mottled mess of color on the garish comic cover.

"My sister had made a congealed fruit mold. When she put some in that fancy new plastic container, the lid didn't close right. It

leaked all over my brand-new comic book. I found the mess at lunchtime."

"It's not pretty."

"She was distracted by the party lines. Listening in to whoever was having a conversation. The last neighbor on my party line disconnected almost forty years ago. Heard they got one of those fancy cordless phones. I prefer mine." James Alden pointed to the heavy black rotary phone by his bedside. A two-inch-thick relic of a phone book nestled beside it. As well as a small black address book. "May I?"

The man smiled. "Go ahead. Bet you don't see those anymore."

Michael touched the rotary phone. The numbers had long ago worn off the dials, and been drawn in with sharp metal. The phone book was almost twenty years old. Pages fluttered as he lifted them. The address book was firm. Although, the leather felt as if it had been caressed for years.

"Old recipes in there. My mother's handwriting. Even a card from a hollertician who dared pay a visit on the Fourth of July. Guess they thought that was one hollerday it was safe to visit the ranches."

"They visited many?"

"They must have followed us home from the stockyards where the celebration was." He adjusted himself on the pillows. "Don't think they have them anymore. Everyone works too much. They don't take the time for fun."

Michael struggled to keep up with handwriting his notes.

"What do you do for fun?" He tilted his head to listen.

Fun? What did he do for fun? "I like to go to the beach and pick up seashells that the tide brings in. Push the stranded ocean life back in. Some of the shells have living animals in them."

"Ever seen a horrorcane?"

What did he mean? Oh. Yeah. "There aren't as many hurricanes in the recent years. I tend to stay inland during them."

The man laughed. "Can't run from the ranch. My workers won't tell me how many animals are left. They have to be cared for. They are my livelihood. All I have."

"What about your family?"

"Wife died years ago. She was a good cook. And liked to sew. She made the curtains in the windows of our home. All the pretty

party dresses for our daughters. Our kids grew up and went to the cities. Haven't seen them in ages."

"I'm sorry." Michael scribbled down notes, and tried not to look at the man's face. A secret only he knew threatened to bubble out.

"It's a tough life. I can tell by looking at you, that you work outside and would understand."

Michael held his breath. He rarely went outside. He worked on computers in an air-conditioned office. However, this man mustn't know the truth. He had promised his father he would not tell James Alden the truth if he visited the ranch.

"Tell me more."

The man launched into story after story. Nights gathered around a burn barrel in winter with marshmallows on sticks. Singing at campfires. Scaring off coyotes. Sunday picnics. The earliest black and white television. His date nights at the drive-in movie theater, and much more that Michael had only read about.

However, there was a question he wanted answered. For his mother's sake. "Tell me more about your children."

James Alden laughed. "They had a fun childhood. Then they grew up and left the ranch for college. Even the girls went, instead of marrying and raising a family. They left home in their pretty party dresses, and returned home dressed as farm hands. As if they wanted to rustle up some cattle, instead of Sunday picnics."

The scrawl on the man's face said more than his words. "I tried to convince my youngest to marry into the ranch next door, or the farm a few properties over. She too was determined to go to college. She hasn't returned home again."

Michael's heart beat fast. He didn't dare ask the question he most wanted to pose. It had to wait. The answer might slip out. "Tell me about." He almost said her name. Her married name.

James Alden looked at him. "You want to know why she didn't return?"

He nodded.

"Look in that phone book. Taped next to the funeral home listing."

Michael gulped. His hands shook as he picked up the phone book. He flipped through the pages until he reached the funeral home section. There was a picture. Of a young couple. A beautiful woman in a stunning, flowing white dress. A man beside her in a

uniform. The man's face had been crossed out, and horns added with a marker. Over his head were hand scrawled words he knew to be unrepeatable. Michael looked up.

Tears drifted down James Alden's cheeks. "My baby daughter. I told her he wasn't welcome in my home as family. Only as a hired worker. None of my children returned home after that. I wasn't invited to the wedding. My wife wanted to go. I refused to let her. She made my daughter's dress. In secret. They sent me a picture." He turned his head.

This man who was known for his hardened heart had softened.

"If you see my little girl, please tell her I'm sorry. I burned the letter decades ago. I don't have her address. Or any of the others. I tried to contact my son. The letter was returned undelivered. Kept the picture to remember my youngest by. She's probably long dead." He picked up his glass of sweet tea and sipped. "Don't tell those caretakers. Have to keep a gruff exterior for them. Keeps them in line."

Michael nodded. James Alden's daughter was alive. She was Michael's mother. And had wanted her father to forgive her for true love all these decades.

The old man settled back onto his bed and picked up a comic book. "Here. Read this if you want."

Michael took the colored pages. It was a fantasy western reminiscent of the black and white westerns of the time when this older man had been a teen. Interestingly, on the final page was a note written in a small cramped hand. "Not all bad." That cursive note could have been his mother's own handwriting.

"Take it. Remember me by it." The man lightly touched his hand.

Michael tried not to jump backwards. "Sure?"

He nodded. "I have a whole room full. They'll go to a museum someday. Guess that's where I need to be."

Michael tucked it in his notepad. "Do you want any more tea?"

"No. Set the glass on the table as you leave." James Alden closed his eyes.

Michael picked up the glass and walked out of the room. This man's heart had been hardened on the ranch, and eventually, the softening had begun.

He stepped back out the front door. Most of the people had left. The nurse remained.

"I was about to check on you. Make sure you survived."

He smiled. "He's okay." He's my grandfather. And I think he knew it.

"Tell me more about the ranch."

The woman laughed. "Isn't much. We have caretakers. Plenty of beef cattle. That's about all. I'm supposed to search for the family soon. Have to find out who wants to inherit the place. If anyone's does."

Michael scanned the open barren landscape. Unmowed fields of cattle. No other houses in sight. It was too easy for fear to be magnified in the heat of summer here. Not a healthy place for a man to raise a family. And he should someday. "Good luck finding them."

He strode on to his car clutching the notepad and the comic book. Something slipped out of the comic book onto the seat. The picture of his parents smiling on their wedding day. Curse words and all.

Going Hunting

Elisa pulled into the parking lot at the park. The hunting club would be here soon. She hurried to gather her supplies and meet at the picnic table.

Today's hunt would be for the miniature deer herd who had recently had several newborn fawns. The hope was that this herd would be able to help rescue the population from extinction. There were only three herds left in the wild, all at great distances from one another. In order to increase genetic diversity, she had overseen the herding and artificial insemination of several of these does last fall.

The largest concern with increasing genetic diversity this way was two-fold. The herds had genetic mutations specific to their environments. Those mutations might not help them in a new environment. At worst, it would harm them. Beyond the mutations, was the stress placed on the mothers who must be anesthetized for the insemination procedure. There was little research done on wild animals who went through the procedure.

Elisa, and her fellow researchers, wouldn't be forging ahead on such dangerous experiments, without more knowledge and trials. If only their ancestors, their parents, and even some of their friends, had heeded the warnings. However, there was no time. It wasn't only this species of deer. Hundreds of other animals were being re-established the same way.

Animals herded into protected parks. Limited ranges. Forced care taking at a distance, and verifying which animals could, would, and did breed in such a manner as to repopulate the now empty landscape of the country, and eventually the world.

Voices chattered as cars parked and people prepared for the hunt. This was one of the few opportunities where future scientists, those who would continue her work, would see these animals in their semi-natural environment.

The hunters chatted up to the picnic table. They carried cameras, camera stands, and long hiking poles for the trek into the gated territory of this deer herd. Several assorted smaller species also called this location home. The poles would deter most that might attempt to attack the hunters. It would be a good trek, to

determine if they too were building thriving communities away from humanity.

Elisa unlocked the gate for the excited group. They tottered in waving cameras and lunch pails. The chatter continued. She turned the key to lock them in.

A noise in the parking lot startled her.

A pickup truck, minus its muffler, rolled in on giant wheels, far too large for it. It took up the last four parking spaces.

A few people didn't respect the work the scientists were doing here, and in the other parks around the country. Some missed their national parks. Scientists hoped they could soon be returned to the people, as soon as the animals that depended on them for survival could survive without the additional protection.

Elisa carried a taser. It would work in an emergency against people. Most of the time.

A man hopped out of the truck onto the running boards. He pulled a couple of guns out of the truck bed. They looked to be at least three-foot long. Maybe longer. Hunting guns which were supposed to have been turned in to law enforcement years ago.

The people with her took one look and ran for cover. The last person paused long enough to snap a picture of the man and his truck.

Elisa waited. A man that determined could scale the fence.

He sauntered up to her waving his guns and ammunition belts. "I'm here for the hunt."

She glared at him. "We are going hunting. Not murdering."

He waved his guns again. "You need someone to protect you from the wild animals."

She held her thick walking stick high. "This will protect me. As will this." Elisa pulled her taser out of her pocket.

The man stared.

"Be gone!" She shook the stick at him.

A couple of silent park ranger vehicles pulled into the parking lot. They would take care of this person.

She didn't dare turn her back on him. Not with him waving guns around. She held the taser firmly pointed at him.

The park rangers approached him from behind with tasers drawn.

Rangers were trained to deal with these situations. More than she was.

Elisa stepped back one step.

The first ranger threw a net over the man.

The man turned.

A ranger aimed his taser and fired.

The man fell to the ground in the tendrils of the net.

As he fell, the gun landed at his feet.

A ranger pushed it out of the man's reach.

Elisa turned and strolled to the trail to join her group.

Somehow, the beauty of a day spent hunting had been damaged. Instead of the expected party-like atmosphere, the group trudged down the trail. Their memories were full of the gun battles, and other horrors, of the recent past. One reason this group of deer were endangered.

She clutched her camera as they reached a clearing where the deer liked to graze. The camera had hung loosely from her neck. Elisa liked to record the geolocation. She zoomed in on a mother and her young. The view screen showed a perfect shot of the pair.

More than a dozen mothers with young foals ate in the open field. This herd was not as skittish of people as the other two were. It would likely be another dozen generations before they fully trusted humans again.

The group gathered and shared their photos. Plenty of perfect trophies to project onto science boardroom walls.

A successful hunt.

Saving the Family Farm

Ryan settled down for his reheated dinner. Undisturbed peace and quiet, after a long, noisy day, in the work world. No clank of a spoon, other than his own. Nothing, and no other person to worry about.

The phone rang. His mother's number.

"How are you tonight?"

"Fine. Eating dinner." He pushed the book he was reading back from his plate to focus on listening.

"Not alone, I hope?"

"Yes, alone. It's fine." She worried about him too much.

"Your dad will be in the hospital for surgery tomorrow at 8 am. We hope all goes well. Visit us soon."

"Sure mom. I will be there."

Ryan hung up the phone. He wasn't even sure what the reason for surgery was. His dad wouldn't have it unless it was serious.

At the hospital, his dad looked at him solemnly before going into surgery. "If I die, you will have three weeks to be married if you wish to inherit the house. Sorry. If you don't, I will have to pass it to your younger brother, and his five kids."

His brother made good money. His brother worked too much. He wasn't around enough to instill those beliefs into his own kids. They children ate it all. They seemed to have no respect for property, or people.

His brother’s brood would destroy the beautiful house and two-acre farm.

A marriage partner was his dad's only answer. Something both of his parents had wanted him to do for nearly two decades. He hadn't even dated in well over a decade. Since his first love died. It would be more than dating. This meant finding someone desperate enough to marry him in three weeks.

All the women he knew were either in long-term relationships, or didn't want to be.

Ryan left the hospital, looking for someone to talk with. His brain muddled through his memories of childhood on the farm. A place of peace and serenity.

None of his friends would be concerned enough to listen to his problems. Close friends had all married and drifted away. They had forgotten to leave forwarding addresses.

At the coffee shop, he ordered a drink and a croissant. The waitress, Amy, had known him for years. Better to practice with her.

"Amy, will you serve me dinner tonight at my house?"

"What?"

Ryan blushed. "Sorry. Will you share dinner with me tonight? I need a listening ear."

"If you come here for dinner, we can talk. I'll be off the clock."

"See you tonight. What time is good for you?"

"How about 4:00?"

"See you then."

After he ate, he trudged to the newspaper stand. A reporter sold newspapers, hoping to catch her big story to lead to a better future. He didn't know her name. "Would you like to go to the park on the next street to discuss a story?"

"I don't even know your name."

"I'm Ryan. I want to know if you have heard of any other similar situations."

"Sounds interesting. I've seen you her often. My partner can watch the stand. I am Julie. What is the story?"

As they walked, Ryan explained his father's latest request. "I don't know if it will be his last request. It is challenging."

"I have heard some funny instances of marriages for convenience." Julie sat on a bench and motioned for him to join her.

Julie relayed stories about odd marriage proposals. "One man asked five women in a day to marry him. All five said yes, and that was an interesting mess to sort out. Another time, a woman begged a man to marry her. It turned out she loved his brother who had died in a mine accident, although the man didn't know the woman before."

"How do men find the courage to ask a woman to marry?"

"Good question. How did your friends ask their wives?"

"No idea. They seemed to go from being single to being married without a thought. They soon moved away." Ryan twiddled a leaf between his fingers.

"Do you know any women you are interested in?"

"No. I didn't even know your name. I don't talk to people much unless I have to."

"Many people marry for convenience. Do you know someone who wants to marry, or will be satisfied to be married for that reason?" Julie leaned closer.

"How will I find someone? Look for widow groups?"

"That would be one place. I don't recommend it. Think about who you know, what you know, who you can enjoy being around. Do you plan to inherit the house, and keep your apartment for yourself? How about a single mom? Give her, and her kids a place to live."

"I can see that. 'If you marry me, you will have a house to rise your kids, and I will leave you all alone. No need to live on the edge anymore.' Would any woman fall for that?"

"Yes. Security means the world to some women." Julie set her notepad on the bench.

"I don't know any single mothers."

"Sure you do." She kicked at a tuft of grass.

"It might work. Any other ideas?"

"There is always pulling someone out of a shelter or college. Not a good idea either. How many women do you know?"

"Counting you? Four."

"Tell me about them." Julie leaned closer.

"My mom, and she doesn't count. I asked Amy for a date. That was a disaster. She is a waitress. Another is the mail delivery person in my office. I think she is married."

"Tell me more about Amy." Julie slid away from him and watched his face.

"She is nice and sweet. She has served me breakfast for the last several years. I guess she is dependable. Other than that, I don't know anything about her. Not even her last name."

She leaned back toward him. "What do you know about me?"

"You are a reporter who sells newspapers."

Julie laughed. "You don't know me well. Open your eyes more frequently. Tell me about the mail delivery person."

"Her name is Jana, I believe. She has a couple of kids with her from time to time. She is usually on time with the mail. Rarely late, no complaints."

"Have you asked her if the kids are hers? They might not be."

"What do you mean?" Ryan asked.

"Sometimes family care for other people's children and take them to work with them. If the kids are with her, they will tag behind, kids always do. Ask them to tell their mom to return. You forgot something you needed to have mailed today. Hear what they say. By the way, you better hurry if you are going to be there when she gets to your desk."

He ran off to his office without saying goodbye. He had two more hours before the surgery would be done, and his mom would call him. His boss would be furious that he had wasted so much time after his father had gone into surgery.

Right on time, Jana and the kids rambled past his desk. The kids giggled as they followed Jana and the mail cart. Jana rounded the corner

He called to the children. "Can you tell your mom I forgot to mail something important today? My dad is in the hospital. The letter slipped my mind."

"No. Mom's not here. She did send you this."

The little girl handed him a card. The kids ran after Jana. They laughed loudly.

Everyone in the office stared.

Ryan opened the card.

"Congratulations, you have found two sisters who would both be most happy to marry you. We will both be at your dinner tonight. You can decide when you hear both of our stories, and choose whom you would like to marry."

Ryan could not concentrate on his work the rest of the day. He was not sure whom he would meet tonight, or how they knew. He called his mother and explained the whole situation.

She laughed at him, and told him to enjoy his popularity.

Amy, Jana, and Julie were all at the coffee shop with the two kids.

"Hi stranger." Amy twiddled her hair. It was long and pretty when not tied in a bun. "It's not as bad as it looks. Jana is married with no kids. Julie has two kids and is not married. As for me, I don't have kids, and haven't been married. Here is our proposal: You choose to marry either Julie or myself. If you marry me, Julie and the kids will be given a place to stay while her life stabilizes. If you marry

her, you can put in a good word for me with another company I know, and would like to work for. Sound simple enough?"

He glanced at their satisfied faces. They were right. This was his best opportunity. Ryan was not ready for such a decision. He wanted more time.

His cell phone rang. "I am sorry, your dad was doing good. His heart quit. Please tell me your evening is going good."

"Yes mom, it is. Can I have a week to choose? I don't have to do it that sudden do I?"

"Get married next week, then have a wedding for the families later if you want. Please save the family farm."

"I will make my decision this week." He glanced at the women around him. "My dad died. I have to choose. I can't do it tonight."

"No need to. Tomorrow, you go out with Amy. Then the next day you spend with me. You can learn more about us all." Julie smiled at him.

"Thanks." Ryan left, without ordering dinner.

Nerissa's Legacy

Katlyn sat on the split rail fence. Sunlight bounced off the sparkling dew, onto the two horses in the meadow. Many horses lived on her family's horse farm. Only two horses were hers, and hers alone. The fate of the most popular broodmare on the farm rested on these two young mares. For years, their mother, a winner herself, had produced several winning thoroughbreds. Then, three out of five did not place in a single race.

The next year, she surprised them with twins. Katlyn named them Moonbeam and Sunray. Everyone on the farm talked constantly about the twins and their future ability to race. The outcome of their mock race would determine whether or not their broodmare mother would be resigned to a quiet life in the pasture.

Her mother stuck her head out the barn door. "Hurry Katlyn, we need to prepare the horses."

Katlyn called Moonbeam and Sunray to her. She patted each on the nose. She led them to the barn. They appeared peaceful and happy in the meadow. The outcome of today's race could change all of that. For one, or both. Normally a quick combing, bridling, and saddling seemed to take mere seconds. Everything seemed to take twice as long as usual. At last, the horses were ready.

The barn door opened.

A neighboring farm supplied the two competing horses. One was a beautiful black color named Stretch. The other a smaller brown named Sandy. Neither were full-blooded Thoroughbreds. This gave the untested Moonbeam and Sunray the advantage.

The sky did not seem as light as when she entered the barn.

"Ready to go to the track." She placed a curry comb on its hook.

"Looks like a thunderstorm is coming up." Justin, the trainer, held Stretch and Sandy's bridles.

"I'm not sure how they will do in the rain. Moonbeam and Sunray have been training for a few months."

"Stretch and Sandy are often out in the rain. Not sure what they will think of racing in it. We can wait, if you think we should?" Justin asked.

Katlyn glanced at the four riders. They had been paid to be here today. "It would be better to try and beat the storm, than run in the mud."

"Time to race."

They passed out of the barn to the grass practice track. Nerissa, the broodmare in question, trotted up to them. She looked over the small crowd of horses and people. Then she trotted back off into the pasture, waving her tail like a flag.

Katlyn watched as Nerissa settled to munching the fresh spring grass in the meadow beside the track.

The horses entered the gate to the dirt track.

Dark clouds spread across the sky. There wasn't much time as she ran to the bench to watch the race.

"It's a good thing races only last a few minutes." She slipped onto the seat beside her mother.

"The race yes. They haven't even warmed up. We have a good thirty minutes before the race." Her mother glanced at the sky.

Her dad leaned over the track fence to speak. "Should we try again tomorrow?"

"It rains every day in the spring. If we wait on a dry day, we will be waiting until June! Besides, one of the stable boys said Nerissa doesn't have much time left. If we don't make a decision soon, she may not be able to foal next year." Katlyn rubbed her arms. The increasing wind had chilled.

"We could make the decision this year without the race." Her dad turned back to the track.

Her mom sipped from a coffee cup. "Nerissa could make the decision. She always seems to know which stallion will make a winning colt. When we have chosen for her, the colts do not win."

"They are starting to trot. If they can beat the rain."

The colts rounded the bend.

Dark, thick clouds gathered overhead. Big drops of rain fell as the horses crossed the starting line. Downpours would soon begin.

The wind roared as it swept across the track. "Is there enough time before the storm?" Katlyn rubbed her arms and stretched her legs.

"No. " Her mom covered her coffee cup.

The horses neared the second turn with Stretch and Sandy purposely in the lead. Moonbeam and Sunray prepared to push past them. A loud crack startled everyone.

"The tree opposite us!" her dad shouted. It was the only tree within falling distance of the track. Valued for its shade on sunny days.

"Stop the horses. Turn them around!" Justin screamed and waved his flags.

The tree trembled before it fell.

The jockeys realized what was happening.

Was it too late?

They tried to slow and turn their mounts.

Stretch and Sandy could be run over by Moonbeam and Sunray.

All four horses turned and raced back.

Branches hit the track.

"I can't see them. It's too dark. Are they okay?" Katlyn jumped up.

"Moonbeam and Sunray are coming back around the second bend. I don't see Sandy and Stretch." Justin peered with his hand over his eyes.

Justin and the family ran to see what had happened.

The tree had caught the jockeys in its branches. The horses had refused to dismount the riders to escape. With a little help, all were untangled, and walked back to the barn to be treated for scratches, bumps, and bruises.

"We don't have our answer. I'm not about to try again today." Justin pushed a branch aside.

"No. It will be tomorrow before the tree will be totally off the track." Her dad pulled Moonbeam's bridle to encourage her into her own stall instead of joining Sunray.

That few minutes had been scary. If the horses had been a few seconds faster, things would have ended quite different. When they finally had the horses and tack cleaned up and left the barn, the sun was shining.

Katlyn glanced toward the meadow.

Nerissa had been forgotten in the storm. That never happened! She ran to the gate. Nerissa snorted, and trotted up to be petted.

She rejoined her parents to walk to the house.

The year Moonbeam and Sunray were conceived, Nerissa had two stallion visitors. One, was a beautiful white stallion. He was big, strong, and a known race winner. He was the intended mate for Nerissa. The other was a slightly smaller stallion. A sweet disposition, young, and in training for races. He went on to win a few races later that year, and the next.

"We should race them again tomorrow." Katlyn sorted her potato chips as if they were horses preparing to race.

"Stretch and Sandy won't be available. They will take a few days to heal." Her father swallowed his tea.

Her mother took a bite of a sandwich. "How about the two retired thoroughbred stallions? They would enjoy the chance to race again."

"We could. They have been out to pasture a long time. They could be wild."

"As wild as a mature horse can be. We'll try again tomorrow."

"Thanks so much." Katlyn ran from the table back to the stable to help Justin prepare for the next day's race. The retired stallions were kept separate from all the other horses. She rarely saw them.

"When will you bring them here?"

"We should probably move them tonight. They will be ready early in the morning. You better go home, and prepare for tomorrow."

He made sure the stalls for Moonbeam and Sunray were locked tighter than usual. Oddly enough, Nerissa was outside. Was she to be resigned to pasture already?

Katlyn tried to be the first at the barn. She ran in. One of the normally empty stalls had been beaten down in the night. What had happened? Who had escaped? She ran to the unusually open doors, which lead to the meadow.

There was Nerissa and a smaller horse, close to the color of her Sunray. Both seemed content, nibbling on grass, and resting in the early morning dew.

"No surprise there." Justin arrived with a bucket of feed.

"What?"

"Gates never could hold that stallion. Call them over. We have to be sure he is fit to run today. He can't race if he hurt himself."

Justin turned out the magnificent white stallion in the other normally empty stall. The white stallion appeared tired, and not impressed with the smaller stallion. The horse glanced at Nerissa. The white stallion gently trotted around the field. When he reached the barn, he pawed at the closed door.

Katlyn's parents arrived to help prepare the horses ready for the race. They surveyed the damage to the stall and door. They helped her prepare Moonbeam and Sunray for the race. As soon as the four horses were ready, the jockeys from the day before returned.

"How is the track today?" This rider glanced up at the tall white stallion.

"The track is fine. How's the weather?"

"Sunny and nice."

As the small group again walked to the track. Katlyn watched for Nerissa in the meadow.

The broodmare waited by the side of the track, under the remainder of the tree that had fallen the day before.

Katlyn hurried on to the bench to watch the race.

The four horses warmed up. The stallions sensed the coming competition. They pranced and pawed at the damp track.

Justin stood at the race fence. "White Lightning and Medallion are ready to race again. I hope the two rivals being together won't cause problems."

"They can hold their own."

Nerissa seemed to be watching the race practice as intently as the people. As the four horses rounded the first bend, she moved to one side, to see them.

They could not see her well.

Moonbeam waved to her mom with a swish of her tail. Coming up on the third turn, the mares were behind the stallions, as this was the warmup lap.

"Moonbeam and Sunray should be heading to the front for the second lap." Justin glanced back. "The third lap will be the trial race. It will be up to the horses themselves who leads, and who follows."

Going into the home stretch, the jockeys encouraged the horses to trade places. As the mares raced into the lead, they seemed to be showing off for their mom. By the first turn, White Lightning sped

up to catch the two mares. As they rounded the second turn, Medallion leapt forward with a burst of speed.

"Is the jockey losing him?" Katlyn jumped up.

"I hope not." Her mom's coffee slipped off her lap onto the ground.

The horses swept by Nerissa. Moonbeam and Sunray were in the lead. White Lighting close behind. Medallion did not seem to be paying attention to the race.

By the third turn, Medallion fought his jockey.

White Lightning had caught Moonbeam and Sunray. They made a beautiful picture. The smaller, sturdier Sunray, racing in between the two taller and more delicate, White Lightning and Moonbeam. Into the home stretch, the three jockeys opened the reins for the three horses still racing.

White Lightning soared past the younger mares. By the first turn, White Lighting was in the lead by two lengths, with Moonbeam close behind, and Sunray trailed by a nose. Medallion raced by, close against the rail. He passed White Lightning by the second turn. Almost immediately, he veered off to the left, and raced for Nerissa.

"The jockey can't control him!" Justin pounded the fence rail.

"He won't stop in time." Katlyn's mom leaned forward.

When Medallion reached the fence on the outside of the track, he jumped. The jockey slid neatly off his back, and onto the ground. Medallion and Nerissa stood muzzle to muzzle.

White Lightning slowed, and Moonbeam almost caught up with him.

"White Lightning is finished. Couldn't hold out. It was a good race," Katlyn's father glanced at the stallions.

"They have two more turns to make." If the mares won, Katlyn could enter them into introductory races.

As they raced around the third bend, Sunray caught and passed Moonbeam. Then, both surged ahead to pass White Lightning by the fourth turn. As they passed the finish line, Sunray was ahead by a nose, followed by Moonbeam, with White Lightning trailing three lengths behind.

After the finish, Medallion and Nerissa trotted off to another area of the field, not visible to those at the track.

"You've done well with their early training." Her father turned to her.

"I'm glad we gave her the opportunity." Her mom smiled.

"Their time was good. Three out of four horses finished the race." Justin stuck his timer in his pocket.

The fallen jockey wasn't hurt, only a bruised pride.

Katlyn watched the three horses begin the walk back to the barns.

"Age hasn't affected Medallion's stamina. If White Lightning had practiced, he might have kept up with Moonbeam and Sunray." Her mom stood with the help of her dad's hand.

"Medallion is uncontrollable as ever." Her dad led her mom toward the house.

"Should I bring Medallion in?" Katlyn asked Justin.

"Wait. Clean up the other three horses. Then, you can ride White Lightning over to the stallion barns. I'll care for Medallion."

Katlyn brushed Moonbeam. This young mare was beautiful. Her coat shimmered in the sun, and in the moonlight. Racing didn't seem to faze her. Frolicking in the meadow was more fun than racing.

Justin groomed Sunray.

"Ride White Lightning to the other stable. Help groom him there."

"Will you be bringing Medallion there?"

"No, I suggest he goes back out into the meadow with Nerissa, maybe for a few more days."

Katlyn sat on the fence. Moonlight resonated off the horses in the meadow.

Nerissa and Medallion trotted up to the two young mares. They enjoyed an impromptu meadow race. The beautiful horse colors blended in the moonlight.

Moonbeam and Sunray had won the opportunity for their mother to have one more foal, and a meadow retirement with her favorite stallion. The young mares would go on to race that year. The following year, they would return to live in the meadow with their mom and dad.

A Past Forgotten

Written Word

Firelight flickered in the faces of excited children. They squealed with delight as Sabina punctuated the story with gestures. Especially if the fire sparked at the perfect time.

She lengthened the pauses, to be sure the whole audience understood the message between the words. That message would be different for the children than the adults.

Storytelling wasn't easy. She had to sense how to encourage the listeners. Occasionally, the audience didn't like the story. Or, it was too close to a disaster they had lived through. Other times, the power of fire and story joined together to bring a fragmented community closer, and able to continue when the days seemed dark.

In this village, famine had killed several of the adults since the snows began. A few were left, with many young orphan children. Children who struggled to understand what had happened.

The laughter ended. Time to move to the next part of the story. Sabina raised her arms up high to begin the final story segment.

An unknown adult male interrupted her. "Are you finished? This is the longest story ever."

The whole crowd gasped. No man interrupted a woman. Certainly not a storyteller. A storyteller was worth more than any village, as she carried the stories of every local village with her on her travels.

The leader of the village stood. "Who are you?"

The children chattered and pulled closer to Sabina.

The man stepped into the light. He wore a dark hooded cloak. "I am Dunstan. Soon, you'll be able to read the stories after I write them down. No waiting on a slow woman to recite them." He held up a piece of parchment.

Sabina waited. The words would arrive. Other storytellers had spoken of written words. "The words may be on paper. Written words will never move the listener as spoken with true meaning words do."

The man laughed. "You can change the meaning of words as you speak. You can't once they are written."

The fire crackled.

A dog barked.

The circle sat silently.

"How will you write the movements and motions of speech? The fluidity? How will you include the moonlight, the wind, the fire?" Sabina raised her arms, as a gentle breeze spoke through her.

"Those will be written as words." The man shifted his feet.

"You have the ability to write, and read it. How will you find time to teach the other people here? They haven't time to take from their daily lives for written words. Listening relaxes the soul. It pulls people together in a shared experience."

Dunstan waved his parchment. "People can share the experience of written words."

"Not at the same time." Sabina stepped closer to him. "Even if there are enough copies of parchment for two to see the written words, they will not experience the same story in the same fashion."

The man backed away.

It would never be acceptable to push even a vulgar man into the dark beyond the firelight. He had threatened no lives. Only the future of stories. The future of their shared past.

No matter. His words would soon join the stories of all the other villages she recited in. Sabina raised her arms to complete the story she had begun as the fire had taken light. Somehow, the mood had changed. She'd bring it back by repeating a line or two.

Painted Paper

Fire rose on the hearth.

Wendel stoked the flames.

Gayla's home would be warm for the day.

Dried tree limbs stood in a corner, ready to be fashioned into fishing rods, or perhaps a fishing crate. Both were needed by the villagers. The stock for next spring was low on both. Working in the community home would be preferred.

However, Gayla's home needed to be kept warm and safe for her. She was at Carla's home, in case her baby was born early. Carla had had three rough pregnancies, and this would be her last.

A knock at the door startled him. No one should be out in the cold rain of season's end. It wasn't healthy.

Darian stretched and growled at the door.

Wendel placed his tools on the floor beside him. He hurried over to open the door.

Leon stood in the pouring rain. "You should have been at work an hour ago. Are you coming?"

"Come in. It's raining. Why would I leave my home and risk illness? I am sure a few men have gone to the warmth of the community house fires." He stepped back to allow Leon in.

Rain dripped off Leon's uncovered head and neck. "Because you have a job you are paid to do."

"We sit in the community center and paint little figures for you. You won't allow us to bring home the things we paint. Or share them with our family and friends."

"No. They have to pay to buy them."

"Art is for sharing. Step in before you are sick." Wendel glanced at the cold puddle Leon was leaving in the entryway. Another mess the visitor had made for the village to clean up.

"No time. I have to go find out if any of you villagers are going to work today. None of you have in a week." Leon stepped back out into the cold rain.

A tree behind him rattled, as the last leaves fluttered to the ground.

Wendel shook his head. "I have much to do here. Preparing for the spring. Did you finish your harvest, and put your food away

before the rain?" He moved to one side as Darian walked out into the cold rain

"Harvest? Nobody has time for harvesting food. I was working."

"You were arranging pretty painted items on shelves. You had plenty of time. Today is a day we are given for pretties. The last several days we were given for harvesting." Wendell grabbed a mat to place in front of the door to collect the rain. "Step in. Don't allow the cold rain into the house. I must keep it warm and dry."

"Work is every day." Leon turned to go to the next home.

Leon had arrived unwatched for, uninvited in this village, and made demands that prevented them from living their daily lives. Gardens had gone late planted, and late picked so that Leon, a visitor, would have the earliest fruits of the summer. Fish had gone uncaught. Little bellies hungry, because of Leon's demands for a home that he refused to share. Women had spent much time alone. The men had painted sticks, rocks, and other items for him to display around the men's community lodge.

All they had to show for it was painted paper. Ugly, green, painted paper. Yesterday, Wendell had fished a piece of the painted paper out of the mouth of Carla's toddler daughter. The girl was hungry for something more than a paper.

"What will you eat this winter?" Wendell pulled the door as closed as he dared, to keep the fire's heat in the home.

"I'll buy food."

Wendell laughed. "There is no buy here. You arrived in the spring with nothing. You asked the villagers to build you a home. You refused to invite them in. You entered the community home for men, and asked us to paint pretty art. Then, you refused to allow the men take the art home to their families. The items they created with their own hands. Art to be shared. Instead, you occasionally give them matching painted paper."

"Yes. Money."

"You did not know how to plant a garden. Gayla and Carla planted one for you. We wanted to make it larger, so you'd have plenty for a family. Instead, you wanted the men painting pretties for nobody."

Leon stepped back. "I didn't ask for a garden."

"We fed you until your garden produced food.".

"I don't have time for a garden. I work."

"You then did not pick the fruits of the mothers." He tried not to glare. Leon had become tiresome to the village. Nobody had spoken to him about his demands. Somehow, Wendell had won the opportunity.

"You told us to take the food if we desired. Many did. We planted more food for you to have this winter."

"You aren't paid to plant food."

Darian trotted back into the house and curled up beside the fire. He grunted.

"Food is life. Water is life. You complain when we hunt for food. You complain when we fish. When we plant food. When we weed the garden. When we harvest. When we irrigate the food." Wendell glanced at the dog napping beside the fire. Life could be good. Without Leon in their village.

Leon glared. "You pay other people to do those things."

"Our children have gone hungry because of you and your requests."

"That's what the money is for. Buy food, and pay someone to cook it for you."

"The painted paper you give us? It all looks the same. Nothing different or special about it. Here. Have it back." Wendell reached to the shelf where he had placed the painted papers Leon had given him. On top was a piece of painted paper that had been chewed on.

Leon took the paper. "What happened to this one? Don't you know the value of money?" He held the chewed piece of paper up.

"Value of painted paper that all looks the same? None. It was eaten by a starving toddler. We have given you all we can. It is time to prepare for spring." Wendel closed the door. Gayla, Carla, and the rest of the village would not go hungry again.

Status Quo, or No?

Jaylen could not understand why the group was unable to comprehend her words. "How more clear could I be?"

"Why should we change what we have always done?" Trammer, the oldest man in the group spoke. "We have always ignored the passing groups of people as they migrate from West to East. It has no meaning. They pass through, to another place."

Jaylen nodded. "Yes. The West has been full for a long time. There isn't enough land or food for the people who live there. For two years, we have more neighbors than the land can support. There is only so far to the West that they can go. What do we do when we run out of room for our own families?"

Jaylen peered into each set of eyes as she continued. "In five years, our small group will double. If the four tribes surrounding us also double, we will have no breathing room, as they encroach upon our territory already. Today, we have a good harvest. We should move while we have supplies, not in five years when the times will likely be lean with no supplies."

"Send a few scouts, to find a place to go to." Trammer leaned back.

"All go together, not split into two groups, some trying to hold land here, while others travel in search of a new home. If we split up, we will lose our families." She had finally told the whole truth as she saw it in her dreams at night. The elders of the tribe respected her dreams. They were forerunners of many past events.

"How long can we wait?" Tony, an unconnected young hunter sharpened his tools as he listened.

"How are the deer and the rabbits these last few months?" Jaylen asked.

"Not many, and thin from running."

"How are the fish?"

Cara the lead fisher repaired holes in a net. "Fewer and fewer as each day passes. We may have enough for this winter. Not enough to reproduce. I am not sure about next year." Cara lowered her head.

"What about the gatherers? What about nuts, berries, grains, roots?"

All of the gatherers looked away, not wanting to answer.

"The time is now. Before we are starving. Before we are hungry we must go. While we have the food and the strength."

Their eyes refused to focus on her.

Trammer looked up. "We have always been here. Why should we go? They should leave. We can out last them. We know the land, and they don't. Do you want us to flee from them?"

Jaylen shook her head. "We have allowed all the settlers to stay. To ask them to leave now, they would laugh at us. It would take much bloodshed, and tears on all sides to perhaps convince them to leave. Or, we could all die. We can find a new place, be the initial group there. Prepare it for ourselves, and our new neighbors. Make sure we have plenty of room for everyone."

Tony looked up. " How far would we have to travel? What about the ones too sick to travel?"

"Farther than our neighbors. Our neighbors are nice enough people. If another band pauses here, there won't be enough food to go around. We have to choose. Stand and fight our friends and neighbors, or give them room to grow, while we move to a new place. In a few years, they might be able to join us in a larger area."

"How would they find us?" Tony placed his tools in his lap.

"Send traders."

Tony smiled at Jaylen.

Most of the people would recognize her wisdom. Some of the elders would choose to stay. They would live with their neighbors, since they were too old to travel far.

Fall travel would be better than in the spring.

"Which way shall we go? How much can we take with us?" Cara asked.

"Everyone who passes through, goes to the East. We should go East, past the people we know, before we turn South. We will find space there. We should travel as light as we can, while leaving nothing behind we may need. When will you and your families be ready? We should travel within days if we wish to avoid winter."

The group of people closed their eyes while they processed her words.

"During fishing and hunting season?"

"We have enough prepared to live well through the winter. Even that which is preparing now will be ready to go within days."

" I want my children to have room to build their homes in a few years. We will go for their future." With Cara's final word, the group returned to their homes, to plan packing and travel.

Cara had offered much assistance. As a close friend and sister should. She recited to her daughters all kinds of fanciful stories of the fantastic places they would travel through and where they would live by next year.

Jaylen smiled. The trip would be difficult. Doable. A new home with breathing room would open up for them. A place where they could roam a whole day without sighting another tribe.

Paranormal

Till Death Do Us Join

Justy opened the front door. "Mom, I'm home."

He threw his backpack along the wall, kicked off his shoes, and ran to the kitchen.

"Did you have a good day?" She stirred what smelled like green beans.

"Okay. Average." Justy grabbed an apple and ran to the living room. He turned on the TV and video game before he flopped onto the floor pillows.

Beginning game credits scrolled as the music blared.

He pulled a picture out of the pillow he was flopped on.

The girl beside him in the picture meant the world to him. He'd find her again someday. Mom promised.

The music strains changed.

He slid the picture back under the pillow. He rolled with the controller chasing after the characters on the screen.

The floor shook.

"Mom!"

"Under the table. It's probably not serious." She ran in from the kitchen.

He jumped up and almost ran to her, then ran back for the pillow.

A loud noise overhead startled him.

A piece of ceiling tumbled down. Dust everywhere.

Justy sneezed.

His parent's heavy wooden bed slipped partially through the hole in the ceiling.

His mom screamed.

Justy had nowhere to go. He clutched the pillow. The picture in his hand crumpled.

His vision clouded. He heard noises, groans, and cries. His hearing faded in and out.

The remains of home littered the ground below him. It appeared as if it had been toppled by a tornado. Two covered bodies were being removed on a stretcher. He was pulled higher, into the clouds.

"Justy, I'm here. I'm so sorry. You had so much life ahead of you." His mom huddled nearby.

Justy took his mom's hand as they floated. "I won't find her, will I?"

"Sure you will. In fact, your chances are better."

Soon, they reached a place where many people gathered. Family and friends of his mom who had already died, and he didn't know, or remember.

A lady floated up to him. "Hi. You don't know me. I am Roza's Gran."

His eyes opened. "Do you know where she is? Can I see her?"

She laughed a gentle, hearty laugh. "Soon. Not now. I have watched you too. I am a watcher, a guardian. Perhaps, you would like to be one too?"

"If I can see Roza!"

"We can ask your mom. You are ten, I believe?"

"Yes. I guess there are no video games here. I might as well be a guardian."

She led him to a break in the clouds. "Look down. Being a guardian is a lot like a video game. Except you have almost no ability to directly interfere with the lives of those you guard. You can nudge them from time to time, and even whisper in their ears. It'll keep you busy."

"Mom, can I?"

"Perhaps. You have much to learn."

"He'll have time to learn how." Gran held out her hand.

It would take plenty of time to learn all the rules. Time was all he had. No need for food, sleep, or illness.

He no longer had a picture of Roza to look at every day. Not that he knew when a day began or ended anyway. The ache grew. He longed to know where she was. What she was doing.

Once he was certified, Gran found him.

"You can see where Roza is. You can see what has been, what is, and what may be. Not everything will happen as you expect. Use caution when guarding the person you love. Don't allow love to become fear, anger, or hatred."

All he wanted was to see Roza's face, and follow her through life. Her life had to be perfect. He would make sure of that!

Gran reached out her hand to his shoulder. "A few years have passed in Roza's life. She is fourteen. You can't watch her every day. You have other people to guard."

He danced with anticipation. Justy had practiced opening the clouds to see his clients a few times. He hadn't searched for Roza. Her heart tug was too strong. It reached from every direction. Other client's heart tugs only existed in a small area around them.

Gran opened the hole in the clouds.

He stretched out on the cloud to observe.

Roza rode in a truck with a man who didn't appear healthy.

Justy peered up at Gran.

She nodded. "He is dying. His aura has holes in it. It won't be long."

Justy turned back to the hole.

"Dad, do you think I will ever love anyone the way I loved Justy?"

The man didn't say anything. He stared forward as he drove.

The scene was boring. Even television shows had more going on. He heard a sound.

Gran wiped a tear from her eye.

"We aren't supposed to have emotions, are we?"

Gran's attempt at laughter turned into a cough. "If we didn't, we wouldn't be doing this job would we?"

She reached for his hand. "She's fine."

"I don't want Roza to be unhappy. I don't want her to forget me. I don't want her to forget to live either."

Gran touched his chin. "I don't want my son to die. I thought my job would be over. I could be born again after he died. My granddaughter needs me too."

"I can protect her." He paused a moment to consider. "Why does he have to die?"

Tears filled her eyes. "I cannot say. He will not be here. You will not meet him."

The man who was Roza's father would not have a chance to be among them. He had believed Roza's father must be a good person, for Roza to be so nice.

Gran sat on another cloud. "Roza will need us both for a long time. I have seen some of 'what might be' as well as many of the 'what have beens.' It isn't pretty. Please, do not view her 'what have

beens.' Promise me. It will break your heart. Love her as you do now. Protect her without her past, as you always have."

Justy gulped, "I am her past, aren't I? She said she always loved me. Has she always been true to me?"

Gran nodded. "She hasn't wanted anyone else. Not everything that happens to a person do they do willingly, or even knowingly."

He would remember those words. Justy had much to do as he watched after Roza and his other clients. Some of them lead boring lives. A young man was an adventurous soul, climbing mountains and snorkeling, usually without proper equipment. Keeping him alive could be a full-time job for any guardian.

Sometimes, Gran, or his mom, would visit with him. He enjoyed those talks. There was plenty of time to read every book he had ever dreamed of, and listen to music without disturbing others. Not much of consequence happened in Roza's life for a few years.

He saw a 'what might be.' A young man she was interested in reminded Justy of him, if he had lived. The man walked in front of a bus while reading a book. It was easy to make him trip and fall. Didn't kill him. It did make him less likable. It changed his attitude, as well as his looks.

Gran found out about what he had done.

Justy expected to be yelled at.

"You aren't there. Don't take her potential happiness away."

Gran's disappointment hurt. He hadn't felt hurt in a long time. Not since before he died.

Roza met the young man. Sure enough, she cared for him. Perhaps even more than she might have, if he had been healthy. Soon, they went their separate ways.

As punishment, Justy was assigned to observe this guy for the rest of his life too. A few months after Roza had left the community where she knew him, the guy met another young woman. She was almost identical to Justy's Roza. This was the woman the injured man had been meant to stay healthy and marry. Both would suffer for life because of Justy's jealousy. He would never be who he should have been. And this young woman would be burdened with a sickly man for the rest of her life as well.

Gran's hand landed on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry. Why did I do it?"

"You didn't realize your own powers for changing the lives of the living. You didn't know you did it. Be more careful. We all make mistakes. Being here doesn't mean we are perfect. Watch."

Gran opened the clouds to a "what had been." Three women and man sat in a conference room.

"It's dangerous. We have to help her." The first woman pushed a photo of a home with a neglected yard to the man.

"I've given her lunch money for two years. Everyday. I follow her. Her life is hard." The woman handed a paper to man. "Read this. You'll know."

"I encourage her. She doesn't know her life isn't normal. I'm trying, it's the best we can do. I have a plan. Don't take her away." The last woman, both smaller and larger than the rest said. "If you take her away, none of us will know what happens to her. Our work might be undone."

The man read the pages. "You are sure?"

The women nodded. "We encourage. We hope. She can escape with help."

Gran closed the clouds.

"Escape? Escape what?"

"I'm sorry. You didn't need to hear that part."

"What's wrong with Roza?"

Gran opened another hole.

Roza's room was almost empty. A bed, a few clothes, and nothing more. The picture panned out, to a house so full there was no walkway.

"Whisper to her if you must. Help her teachers help her. I've seen a 'what may be' they don't know about." Gran closed the cloud.

"What's wrong?"

She wouldn't look at him. "Something I can't fix. Why I am here instead of being reborn."

"What can I do?"

"Listen to your clients."

Justy couldn't watch Roza for a while. He was too upset with himself.

He focused on a client who was a strong business man. Perhaps that man could give him an idea of how to help Roza. The

man focused his life around computers, and expected that they were the way of the future.

The day he opened the hole in the clouds to follow her again, he saw her driving a car with a young man riding beside her. He never heard the man's name.

A car rounded the curve on the wrong side of the road. There was no way to prevent a head on collision.

Justy reached out with his mind and lifted her car into the air.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on Roza. "My dear, my love," he whispered. "I must leave you. I can help you no more."

When he was sure the other car was gone, he set her car down with a bump, to wake her back up.

Roza woke with a start. Her foot slipped off the gas pedal.

The man beside her didn't move, or make a sound.

Justy sat up with tears in his eyes.

Gran reached her arms around his shoulders.

He cried. It was good to cry. He had always believed the dead didn't cry.

"You can't abandon Roza. You accepted her."

"I love her too much. There was a knot in my stomach, seeing her with that guy."

"Your choice saved four lives, maybe more. He is like a brother to her, not a lover." Gran's eyes pierced his.

"I don't think I could stand to see her with a lover. Other people, I don't care. Not my Roza."

"Soon you will. You will want to know what happens to her." She squeezed his shoulder and went back to her own work.

Justy tried to guard other clients in addition to Roza. The adventurous man had hiked to the point of no return. Mount Everest claimed another victim. The man died at the moment Roza's life had been spared through his hand.

He couldn't follow Roza as much as he would like. He enjoyed eavesdropping on her thoughts from time to time, even when he didn't have time to see her. After a while, a man's name seemed to cross her thoughts more often than not. Justy opened the clouds to see how she was doing.

The hole in the clouds showed her riding in a car with a young man.

This man was almost the polar opposite of the young men she had been interested in before. No prince charming, this one.

She seemed happy with him, and they talked of impending marriage.

A pang of emotion disturbed Justy. Of what emotion, he wasn't sure. Jealousy wouldn't be fair to him, or Roza. Anger, perhaps that this man he didn't know loved her? He followed the young man for a while.

The young man dropped Roza off and drove away. Within moments, he had picked up another young woman, and drove off to a semi private place. As he told her of his marriage to Roza, Justy almost pulled away. Maybe this girl was this man's sister. Then, the man reached out, pulled the girl close, and kissed her.

Justy was enraged. With no idea what to do. He went back to his training of how to find 'what have beens.' While viewing them, they showed Roza was almost afraid of this man, and didn't know how to be rid of him. There was no time to contact Gran. He had to do something!

He opened the hole again, and watched the man drive away alone. Justy reached with his mind and turned the radio off. The young man, over confident in his driving, reached for the radio, and missed a curve. The car tumbled, and the man flew out of the car.

Justy sat back and closed the clouds, trembling.

Gran was beside him. She turned away.

Justy opened the clouds again. There was Roza, by the man's side. Bound and determined to make this relationship work. She didn't know, or suspect, the other girl. She looked up to the clouds. Her piercing gaze caught him.

"Gran, how did he survive?"

"He has a guardian. He has some purpose, as broken as it may seem."

Justy was ashamed of himself. "There wasn't time to tell her, and she wouldn't believe a ghost. She would see me as such."

Gran patted his shoulder. "You don't know every thought she has. She still loves you. Roza feels she has to move on."

Justy watched his other clients for a while. He wasn't emotionally involved with them. To him, their lives didn't matter. He kept them alive, without caring about their actions, or thoughts.

One of his female clients helped others recover from broken homes. Perhaps Roza needed to meet her.

He opened the clouds.

Roza tumbled down a set of stairs. She grabbed the rail.

He reached out and grabbed her before her arm snapped.

She saw him, he was sure of it.

The man he had almost killed arrived to help her up the stairs.

She slept soon. Too tired to care about anything.

This wasn't the life he wanted for her.

He ignored his other clients, and focused on the place she had fallen.

Roza worked there.

The managers broke dozens of laws at this fast food restaurant.

Justy smiled. He opened the clouds on another of his clients. She was a health department inspector. A whisper to do a surprise inspection, and the restaurant managers were in serious trouble.

Sadly, they took it out on the hardest working employees, including Roza. She couldn't work with her almost broken arm. They fired her.

Justy searched through his clients to find someone he trusted who could hire her. She deserved the best job in the world, where she wouldn't suffer abuse again.

By the time he checked on her again, she was working for another fast food restaurant. Typically, as the only person besides one manager. Again, this manager was breaking laws, and putting Roza's life in danger. Another message to the health inspector, and this restaurant was closed forever.

"We have to help her."

"Try to help her out of college. Maybe life will be better then." Gran pointed to a building in the distance.

"Roza's sick. She hasn't woke up for three days."

Gran bent down and peered through the clouds. "I'll whisper to the man."

The man took her to the hospital where they said she had a spreadable disease and would recover. Nothing serious. The college threatened to kick her out for missing classes. She lost another restaurant job due to illness.

Life went downhill fast.

"It isn't fair." Justy stamped on the clouds.

His mom watched the opened clouds. "I couldn't observe the hurt of the living. That's why I don't try to find your sister."

"I want to help her. It seems everything I do backfires."

"You're doing good. You really are."

"I've caused a dozen employee abusive restaurants to be closed. It hasn't helped her. She's hungry, and has no food."

Gran appeared beside him. "Look!"

The man she had married took a swing at Roza.

She hid.

Not before Justy saw the impact. He covered his eyes. "I wish he had died."

"I think she does too."

Later, he saw her.

Two black eyes, and a checkbook in hand. "I'm listening." She gazed up into the clouds, inches away from where he watched her.

Justy gulped. He turned to another client whose heart tug screamed he was in danger. Silly man. Nothing wrong. A dog barked as he skulked by. Justy watched closer.

This client didn't live there. The client snuck up to the house and hid behind the bushes. When nobody was looking, he pushed up a window screen and stepped into the room behind.

He turned away. Whatever happened, it was this man's business, and not his.

Opening the clouds on Roza again, he saw her with another man. Similar to the previous one. He seemed sincere enough in their conversations.

Soon, he strayed off and left her because she had married and divorced.

Roza's tears streaked as she drove home that night. She lived alone, and slept when not in college, or at work, at another fast food restaurant. Not a job she deserved.

Justy believed she no longer communicated with the man who abandoned her. He waited.

One morning, the sun shone too bright. The young man rounded a corner in his pretty car. The man didn't see the truck. The accident didn't kill him. It sent him to the hospital for a long time.

Gran shook her head. "He could have helped her."

"He didn't. He left her behind."

"The man would have. If you had given him time. He taught her to use a computer."

"He abandoned her."

A few days later, Justy checked on Roza again. She was back, checking on the man after he had made it home. In a wheelchair. She still cared for him. She turned as Justy watched. Roza looked up, almost seeing him. That wasn't supposed to happen.

Justy shivered.

Gran reached out to him.

His eyes met hers.

Justy returned his focus to his other clients for a while. One of them could help Roza. One of them had to have good employment, and want a healthy young woman to work for them. Except, Roza wasn't healthy anymore. The abusive employers had left their mark on her. Too many years of work, and school, keeping her awake twenty, or more, hours a day. Her body had aged beyond her looks.

This time, Roza met a man he didn't like. At least this man didn't cheat on her. He was dangerous. Justy called for Gran.

"Gran, I'm scared to try to influence her. I believe she knows I'm watching."

"What do you want to do?"

"That man is dangerous. I want him away from her."

"I guess you need to work on him."

Justy watched. It was easy to convince the other man he didn't want to be with Roza.

Roza's health problems worsened.

The man would rather be with someone who could take care of him. Not someone he had to take care of.

A group of women teased and bullied Roza.

She reported it at work. Her first almost reliable, and dependable job.

Before long, her place of employment, fired her for reporting bullies.

Justy's mouth dropped. It wasn't supposed to be that way. They were supposed to protect Roza, not the bullies.

"Gran, I'm angry. I don't dare do anything. It isn't right."

Gran sighed. "No. I'll take care of it. You follow Roza."

"Can I watch?"

She nodded. "I think you should."

"Can we give those bullies flat tires and make them late for work? They'd lose their jobs for sure!"

Gran laughed. "Nope. Not enough. Sadly, they wouldn't lose their jobs over a flat tire, if they didn't lose their jobs for bullying."

Over the next two years the bullies disappeared. One almost died on the operating table.

"Sure that's enough?" Gran watched through the opening in the cloud.

"Never. What more can we do?"

She waved her hand and brought out the 'what might be' pictures. All of the managers who should have supported Roza, lost their jobs. Her direct supervisor died a horrid death. The company closed its doors, never to open again.

"A string of closed companies follows Roza. Do you think she notices?" Gran closed the cloud.

"She said that the other day. She wanted a new job, and didn't dare apply. She liked the company too much. I don't know how to help her."

Roza was on her own again. Both sad and happy to be alone.

Justy was sad to see her alone. Though glad that she wasn't with someone she couldn't trust.

Roza soon met another man.

This time, the relationship was different. Justy wanted to warn the guy to take care of her. This time the accident was slight. No one hurt. No damage done. A scare to keep Roza safe.

Gran showed up. "Justy, you shouldn't have done that. Listen."

"I'm scared." Roza spoke to her friend on the phone. "Every man I ever like ends up in a horrible car wreck every time something goes wrong. Even if I didn't want this relationship, I'd be afraid to leave, they might kill him."

"Who do you believe it is?" The friend asked.

"I thought it was one person. My earliest boyfriend, Justy. He's dead."

Justy shivered.

Gran took his hand.

His mom was there to.

He was in deep trouble. "I love her. I don't want her hurt."

"Allow her to live her life. Do you want her to hate you?"

His mom was right. He vowed to back out of her life. It was odd to observe, and not intervene anymore. The pain she survived was physical and mental.

One day Roza gazed up at the sky, as if trying to catch his eye. "Justy, please. I am tired. You have watched over me. Please, I am in pain. I don't want the pain anymore." Tears rolled down her cheeks as she begged.

Gran was beside Justy. "There is still pain here. I don't know what to do. She wants to come here."

"Your other clients have all moved on. You can spend some time together, then be reborn. Hopefully, your next life will be better, and together."

"The men that she married?"

"They have new lives. All reborn."

Justy sent his thoughts to Roza.

Roza sat. She took a final deep breath. Slowly, she exhaled. Her body slumped down on the ground. Her soul appeared in front of him. Shyly, she reached her hands out to him. "You followed me."

Justy gulped. "I tried to protect you."

"You hurt me, and others. You meant well. Show me around."

"Don't stay long," Gran said.

"Oh Gran, it's wonderful to see you!"

"Go, you two. It's time. I am going to be reborn. You two will go again soon."

Justy and Roza stood arm in arm.

Gran dissipated.

He opened the clouds.

The room was bright with light. Dozens of people gathered around to view the birth of a healthy baby girl.

Soul Bubbles

The crowd jostled for position at the viewing window.

People brushed past Kay in their search for a soul to raise.

Some had been here many times before.

Others, like her, hung back.

Anna stood beside her. She hoped to hear a soul speak to her this year. None had spoken to her the previous year.

"Make way! Make way! We won the right to be here first." An angry voice shouted from behind the crowd.

The richest couple in town pushed their way forward to vie for one more soul to raise. Janet and Brent already had five. Couldn't they share?

Anna's voiced trembled as she clasped Kay's hand. "We better go if we hope for a chance this year. The crowds are bad. Few souls choose to be born each year. Look over here, on the other side of the sign."

The sign hung in front of the wall of glass. Red arrows pointed to it, and toward the crowded section.

Rules:

Clearly state your name.

Clearly state what you expect from your soul.

Clearly state your status.

If no soul speaks to you, leave.

Soul bubbles generally chose the active side to find new families and lives. A few souls, maybe like themselves, floated off alone on the empty side.

Kay stepped bravely up to the voice box in the glass wall. "I am Kay. I hope for a child who will care for me as I will care for them. I don't prefer either gender. I live a simple happy life. I hope to be able to provide a good life for any child."

A few souls bounced as if trying to determine if what she said was enough. These bouncy souls could fit in your hand. Some were pink, others blue, while many shone with varying shades of white light. None left the viewing window. That was a good sign. She

could sense, rather than hear it. A soul spoke to her. "Are you both a couple? Or two single mothers?"

Kay's hands trembled. She reached out to the glass wall to support herself. If she answered this soul wrong, she could lose her status, and not have a child this year.

They were good friends, nothing more. Anna had suffered severe pain the previous year when she went alone. Which is why they had gone together this year.

"We are good friends. We do live next door to each other and share good days, and bad days. We are as close as two friends can be."

Another flurry of bouncing, and all except one of the souls rushed off to the other side of the sign.

Kay blinked back tears and turned away.

The voice spoke. "Wait. They are going for the littlest soul to decide if she wants to be born. Please don't go. She has been rejected too many times."

Kay hadn't even believed it was possible to reject a soul.

"If a soul didn't choose you, please leave." A body-less voice shouted from behind.

Kay stared at the window, "Please call some back. They think you don't want us. They want us to leave."

A guard stepped their way.

A flurry of souls bounced toward them. There seemed to be almost as many souls floating towards them as stayed on the other side of the sign.

The voice echoed inside her head. "Here is the littlest soul. She is waiting for a special quiet home. If you will have her, she will bring you joy."

This little soul was smaller than the rest. Instead of pink, she glowed a bright white that almost burnt Kay's eyes.

Of course she wanted a soul to raise. All she wanted was a happy child.

She wanted her friend to be happy. "Is there a soul for my friend Anna too?"

The souls bounced and chattered amongst themselves. Then one spoke into her head. "We try to speak to her. She cannot hear us. One tried last year, and was sad when he was rejected."

Anna hadn't said any of the souls spoke to her. The whole experience had been horrible, with nothing other than the noise from the crowd.

Kay held Anna's hand. "Can you hear them speaking to you?"

"How can a soul speak? They are colorful bubbles in air waiting to be chosen. Some say they speak. It seems wishful thinking, or dreaming. I don't know how to choose a soul. What am I looking for?"

Kay hadn't known her best friend couldn't hear the souls. Did she not remember when she herself was a soul waiting to be chosen? Kay could remember it vaguely. She tried several times to be chosen, and it was always one of the more vocal souls who found homes. Then, she too had tried this trick, breaking away from the crowd. That had been almost twenty years ago.

"Can I speak to the soul who wishes to go with Anna?"

"I wish she wanted me." The voice was soft in her ear, almost crying. "I tried for her attention last year. I want to be a boy. I want to be born." The soul tears were almost sobs. The pink and blue bubble sank to the bottom of the window, and out of sight.

"Please, bring him back. I will take the littlest souls. Are their many who don't hear souls?"

Her final question was lost forever to the ringing bells of two souls being chosen.

Kay and Anna were escorted to the waiting room. Here they would receive their soul incubators.

The other people were all almost finished receiving their unborn souls. The room soon emptied of people receiving their incubator.

A nurse handed them forms to read. Every day they had to check the incubator at least three times a day. Turn it the way the flashing lights indicated. Call for the Egg Cracker when the blue and pink lights flashed. Sounded simple enough. Every year people failed in these steps. Damaged souls were returned to be released, and try again the next year.

Another nurse wheeled in their cart with one pearly white, and one blue incubator. The incubators appeared simple enough. A giant egg balanced on a metal pedestal. The pedestal kept the temperature regulated. Warning lights blinked. The liquid stopped sloshing, and the nurse pushed a button.

Kay's journey had only begun. The journey to the child she dreamed of.

A new dream haunted her. The tears of the soul giving Anna a second chance. Her life's work would be to try to give Anna, and others like her, the chance to hear the souls, and not be left without a child because she could not hear the soul speak to her.

Tonight, she would sleep. Tomorrow, she would research working with the souls. It took special security clearance to work in the soul home. Her modest background might make it difficult. Without the pushy attitude of the nurses, she'd have trouble being accepted.

She couldn't ask her new soul for hope. They couldn't communicate once they were in the incubators, until the eggs cracked and they became live infants.

The next morning, the incubator flashed light blue on one side.

Kay turned the egg-shaped incubator onto that side. "I hope this is the correct side, and not the opposite side."

While eating breakfast, she read the pamphlets she had received. "Check for yellow content light on base of incubator cradle." Yes, it's there. I haven't killed her yet.

"The nurses are available to answer any, and all, questions."

She laid the "Watch Your Baby Grow" pages aside.

The unborn child's soul was a tiny blob of invisible cells.

The pamphlet would be valuable later, to be sure the soul developed properly.

Anna stood outside her home and gazed down the grassy walkway.

"I'm ready for work today. You'll make us late." Anna's pale hands gripped her lunch pail.

"Have you checked your incubator this morning?" Kay asked.

"It was flashing. I put it in the closet. It takes it nine months. Why they want it to flash at you I have no idea."

"Let me see it please."

Didn't Anna remember her soul development classes from a few years ago? Had it been too long? Hopefully, I can help her.

Anna led the way into the house and rolled the egg holder out of the closet. It blinked almost orange faster and faster. At least it hadn't blinked red. "You have to turn it when it blinks, to the side it

requests." Kay tilted the egg and breathed a sigh of relief when it showed a steady yellow at the bottom.

"Why should I have to do that? Why not build it to turn it itself?"

Kay wasn't sure she knew this Anna. What was wrong? She hadn't been like this before. "I have to hurry on an errand before work. Please check on your egg regularly. Tell me know if it's too much trouble."

Kay practically ran to the soul home. Would the nurses even be available? What would they think of a first-time soul caretaker who arrived back within twelve hours?

To her relief, several others waited at the door with questions. A young man had brought his egg back with him because it was orange instead of blue. She helped him turn it to the correct angle. They chatted while waiting in line.

As soon as it was her turn with the nurse, her questions began in earnest.

"Why can't I hear her voice?"

"The souls have to focus on growing. Their voices can't be heard through the egg shell."

"Why can some people not hear the souls speaking to them?"

"I can't answer that."

"Doesn't everyone remember being a soul themselves? I had forgotten until yesterday. I remembered it clearly, while at the window."

"Please, if you have no egg care issues, you must leave. I have other duties to attend to." The nurse attempted to herd her towards the door.

A soul bubble floated over the nurse's head to prevent her from opening the door.

"I am an old soul, and I say she stays."

"We don't need her." The nurse paused while writing a note. "She isn't trained and isn't from a high-status family."

"It isn't her family's status which matters. It's her status. I listened to her yesterday. She spoke to several souls. More than the one she took home."

"Only soul home managers can talk to multiple souls." The nurse scowled.

"I can hear her. I want to work with the souls, and better understand why my friend can't hear them. Why has this changed her?" Kay asked.

"Anna is a damaged soul. She has tried with this life to rebuild and repair the damage. She wanted to be born again to prove she had recovered. It hasn't happened in this life either." The old soul floated to her shoulder.

"What about the soul who chose her? What will happen to him?" Kay asked.

"That remains to be seen. Your official job will be transferred to here. Please go bring your incubator. You will begin learning what you need to know to help here in the soul home." The old soul floated toward the counter.

Kay turned to hurry home. She paused at the door. "What is your name?"

"I have been called by many names. You may call me Shara. Trish and I will be waiting."

Kay returned with the incubator in tow.

Shara waited for her in the viewing room.

Kay plodded up to the window.

Souls bounced as if playing games that she couldn't recognize.

Her child soul's incubator gave off a light pulsating glow.

"There is much to learn," Shara said. "Much you may remember, some you will not. This is where we observe and care for the souls. What do you want to know?"

"Can you explain the colors? They all have such unique voices and attitudes, even here."

"The bubbles which glow pink always have been, and always will be girls. The bubbles that glow blue, are always boys. Some, glow with both pink and blue, and can be either gender depending on their personal choice combined with their caretaker's choice."

Shara floating over Kay's head.

"What about the pearly white ones?"

"They are special souls. Sometimes genderless, as they have important things to do in often their final life. They will choose to be separate from, while a part of both genders."

Her soul child flashed white. They called her the smallest soul. What secrets did she hold? What was her life plan? Will she live

her own life, and leave me behind? Regardless, Kay would help shape her destiny, as this soul would shape hers.

Kay learned the quiet routines of each of the souls, and chronicled them as the days passed. Part of her job was to work with other soul homes to see if any should transfer to a new community to try again if no one would care for them here. Her studies led her to some interesting research. She had not found an answer as to why some could not hear the souls speak.

"Shara, how can the soul's voices be heard? Why can't Anna hear them?"

"Soul voices can only be heard when the time is right for the person to have a child. Some don't hear the voices because they aren't interested. Some don't hear them because they believe it's a throwback to mental illness."

Those words rang through her head for weeks as she watched the soul bubbles and Anna.

Her tiny soul developed. The glowing white soul bubble bounced and played inside the clear egg. Within weeks, the tiny mass of cells showed themselves. She recorded the weight and estimated size of the mass every day. Gradually the body mass became recognizable, and filled the soul bubble completely.

This was normal. She hadn't seen a soul devoured by the body before, and wondered how it felt. She wished she could communicate with her special soul again.

"It doesn't hurt." One of the bubbles in the viewing room spoke.

"I didn't know you could hear my thoughts." Kay settled into a listing position.

"The more time you spend here, the more we hear you. And, the more you can hear our thoughts, if you try."

Kay laughed. She would have to be careful what she thought. No wonder this was considered a tough job.

Each day Kay grew more excited to watch her baby grow.

Anna was afraid of hers.

Her friend would almost forget to turn him every time.

"Anna, please. I'll take him too if you can't care for him."

"That would be breaking the rules, and even you can't do that." Anna covered her eyes.

"I can reassign him. If I reassign him to me, it will be fine. Nobody is looking for a child. He can be adopted when he is born."

"I am tired of the flashing lights. They give me headaches. I wanted a child. Now, I don't." Anna's tears streaked as she carried the incubator to Kay's home.

"I wish I could have him after he is born. Maybe when he grows up."

Anna placed the incubator on her table.

"We aren't spending as much time together as we used to. Why not plan a picnic down by the creek?" Some time away from work and the eggs might cheer Anna up.

"I'm scared. I don't know why. Things have changed between us. You have moved on. I always believed I'd have a child first, since I'm older than you. I don't have the energy to care for the child I dream of."

Kay wasn't listening to her words. What she was hearing was faint. A whisper so light, the words were indistinguishable. That doesn't make sense. Soul voices should only be able to be heard in the soul homes where they could be magnified.

"Anna, we'll take the eggs in for a quick checkup. It won't take long. Trish will be there."

"At least we can ask if your idea is okay. I don't like it there. It's too silent."

Anna pulled the incubator cart.

There was something else, something Kay couldn't quite pinpoint. As if there was hope deep within fighting against the visible feelings and actions.

Trish was at her desk in the incubator room. She glared at them.

"Trish, check on them please." Kay stopped the incubators in front of Trish.

"You know as much as me." Trish scribbled on her papers.

Anna turned to sit down in a waiting chair.

Kay grabbed her arm and led her out of the waiting room. In the viewing room, they both sat on the floor.

"Anna, lean back against the wall and relax. Trish will be here in a minute."

As Anna leaned back, several souls that Kay knew floated closer.

Shara floated nearby. Watching, or waiting, she wasn't sure.

The fear on Anna's face was evident. There was something else, deeper than fear.

"I'm scared. I want a child. I've been hurt," her soul whispered.

"Who has hurt you?"

Her body slumped in a tense trance. "Not you. In another life. The way babies used to be born. It was brutal. The sight of a baby scares me. I don't remember it all. I do remember the pain and the fear," Anna's soul spoke.

The souls tried to reach out and comfort Anna. "Her body died in childbirth. Mine did too," said a soul. "She loved children and wanted one more. Her body couldn't bear another."

Kay remembered the stories of the old way people had children. How had it become separated? Wasn't it better, and safer this way?

Shara glowed beside her. "Safer it may be. Some souls are imprinted from the past."

"This isn't her last chance is it?"

"No. Not her final chance. It is her last chance for this child. He has been damaged. Her fear is too great. She must overcome it, and overcoming fear isn't easy. Take the boy. He will be a comfort to her later. Wake her up."

"Her soul, I heard it at home. It whispered to me. She hears the voices from her former life, and hasn't quite woke up to this life."

"Your little one is strong," Shara said. "Her purpose, and yours are already intertwined. She needs the boy too."

"Would he be bitter if he grew up under Anna's fear?"

"Perhaps, and fearful too," said one of the waiting souls. "Studying history will easily show you what happens when children grow up unwanted, and in homes away from what they need to flourish."

Anna's eyes opened. "What happened? Why are you whispering? Or is there a breeze in here?"

Kay took her hand to help her up. "We have a lot to do."

Trish waited for them in the incubator room. "Kay, your girl is fine. Anna, your boy has a deformed leg from laying on one side too long, too many times, in the egg."

Anna slumped beside her.

"It's against policy. I need to take Anna home. Can I leave them here until morning? I'm worried about her."

Trish opened her mouth and clicked her tongue against her chapped lips.

Shara floated into the room. "Take Anna home. They will be fine until morning. Come early."

Kay pulled Anna out the door.

The days passed in a hurry for Kay.

The eggs developed well. There was no way to know if the little boy soul would recover.

When the eggs began to vibrate she hurried to call the Egg Cracker.

On her way back, she noticed that Anna was not home.

The Egg Cracker used his tiny pick and hammer to break open the shell. He lifted the top, and pulled out the soaking wet infant.

Kay watched breathless. How would the tiny baby look when dry? Would she be able to hear the soul speak to her? Or like a regular person, soon forget the sound of her child's soul voice?

He handed her the newborn infant.

She cradled the infant close.

Tiny eyes opened. Two tiny fists reached up.

The second egg opened with a loud crack.

The Egg Cracker held out the tiny boy. He knew the story, the whole town did. The little boy could not be held properly. One of his legs twisted around, and back under him in a painful angle.

"Can he be fixed now that he is awake?"

The Egg Cracker placed the infant in his new cradle. "I'm not sure. I'll call the baby doctor in to check. She should be here tomorrow. You already know everything I can tell you." A beep sounded at his side.

"They all seem to be coming today. I must hurry."

Kay sat on the chair next to the boy's cradle. She watched both infants. Not sure what to say, she waited, listening, hoping to hear words of comfort, or encouragement.

There was a knock at the door.

"It's Anna. How are you?"

Kay shifted her position. "Come in Anna. The little souls are now babies. We have to name them."

Anna waited a moment before opening the door.

Kay pulled a blanket over the boy's deformed leg.

Her friend opened the door and peeked in. "Are you sure I should be here?"

"Yes. Sit beside me."

Kay placed the little girl in her cradle next to the boy's cradle. "The Egg Cracker left moments ago. I need to prepare their formula."

Anna sat at the table. She reached out towards the babies.

Kay handed her a bottle. "Here, feed the little boy. I'll put him in your lap."

"I can't. It don't seem right." Anna pushed the bottle away.

"What do you mean?"

"It don't seem right. Not the right way to feed them. There must be a better way."

Kay thought back to her recent historical studies with the souls, there had been another way, once. She shivered at the memory. She liked it better this way. It was the only way she, or anyone living, had known.

She balanced the baby girl and bottle on her lap. "What shall we name them?"

"You name them. They are yours."

Kay peered into the little girl's eyes. Her hair was unusually white. "What about Amy?" No response.

"Tammy?" Nothing.

Her mind searched for a thought from the tiny soul. "Dalonna?"

The baby cooed.

"Dalonna it is then. Rest while I feed your foster brother." She placed Dalonna in the cradle.

Kay glanced up at Anna. She reached for the boy, taking great care to keep his lower half covered. She didn't want Anna to see what she had done. "What about you. Who are you?"

He kicked his one good foot, and she adjusted his position. "Are you Andrew?" No response.

"Are you Jamie?" No sound.

Dalonna smiled.

"How about Ollie?" Dalonna cooed, and the boy kicked his good leg.

A knock rattled the door. "Kay, it's Jody, the baby doctor."

"Come in."

Anna's face turned pale. "Why? They look okay."

Jody walked in and smiled at Kay. "Everything looks good here. How are they?"

"Dalonna finished her formula."

The doctor checked Dalonna first.

"The girl is fine. She will be beautiful. That white hair, should fall out, and change colors soon." She covered her up. The remains of the incubator eggs glittered in the early morning sun. "Then again, she was a white soul, wasn't she?"

"Ollie will be finished in a minute."

Jody pulled up a chair to watch them.

Kay's face turned red, knowing the baby doctor could sense a problem. Or maybe see what Anna could not.

Ollie finished his formula.

Kay handed him over.

Jody took him. She lifted the blanket that covered his legs.

"What's wrong with him?" Anna half covered her face.

Jody glanced at Anna. "He was left on his left side too long, too many times. It could not stretch out and develop correctly."

Anna sobbed.

Kay touched Ollie's tiny hand. "Is there any hope, or surgery?"

Jody covered the baby back up. "No. Once, many reconstructive surgeries would have been performed. Now, we know the long-term effects are not hopeful. Surgery wouldn't help. We can try to work to stretch the tendons out. It may take years."

Anna turned away from the child she had broken.

"Of course, others would suggest you allow the soul to depart the body and try again. It's not easy. It may be best for the soul."

Kay focused on the memory of what the souls had told her. "If his tendons can be stretched, can he lead a normal life? Will he be able to walk?"

Jody crossed her arms. "Possibly. If not, the longer he lives, the more difficult it will be for his soul to leave his body willingly."

The boy's soul had called out to her, begging to be born, to have a chance.

Jody reached for Kay's hand. "If he lives and cannot walk, there is no guarantee he will find someone who can care for him. He will be frustrated, and feel that he is a burden. It may require several people to care for him daily, until he dies of frustration and pain. We have no idea how much pain he is in."

Anna's sobs interrupted her. Anna reached to touch the tiny hand he offered. "It's my fault. I should care for him until he dies."

Jody turned to her. "If you had paid attention to him as an egg, this wouldn't have happened. If you didn't have time then, how will you have time now, or in the future? Who will care for him when you die? He will outlive you by at least two decades."

Anna's tears flowed down her cheeks. "It's the wrong way! You know it. That's not the way they are supposed to be born. How were we reduced to this?"

Kay reached out to steady Anna's shoulder. "Jody, we will take them both to see Shara and hear what she says. She feels the boy will be important to Dalonna."

Jody sighed. "If Shara has said he must live, he must live. We will wait a few days. Then, we will begin exercises to increase his range of motion. He cannot lay on top of his foot as he grows."

Jody turned to Anna. "Until I speak with the authorities, you are not to be left alone with Ollie." She left the small house.

Anna turned to Kay. "What now?"

"We wait. In the morning, we will go together to see Shara with the babies. Maybe their souls will speak to us."

"It's wrong. It isn't natural. If only." A haunted look crossed Anna's eyes.

What was Anna's soul trying to say?

Kay and Anna strolled to the Soul Home with Dalonna in her infant sling and Ollie in Anna's arms. The signs for the next soul choosing date, a month away, were posted on the building.

Trish greeted them with her usual sour grimace. "Did they turn out well?"

Her face turned even more sour at the sight of Ollie. "Place the deformed one on the counter. His soul will soon depart to try again next month."

"We are going to talk to Shara. She said the boy is important." Kay held Dalonna closer.

Trish glared at her. She scribbled on her paperwork and waved them on.

Kay reached over to gently turn Anna from her stare.

Shara would be in the viewing room.

"Sit here. Shara will be here soon. Lean back against the wall of glass."

Anna slumped against the glass.

Souls prepared for next month's choosing. Lots of color, many blue, pink, multi-colored, and a few white souls, flitted nearby. None as pearly as Dalonna had been.

She peeked at Anna who had gone trancelike again.

"Ollie, can you hear me?"

"Yes. I want to live. I wasn't able to before."

Kay blinked back a tear. "Is it always this way for you?"

"No. She needs me. She couldn't have me before."

"Anna, or Dalonna?"

"Both."

"It's not Anna's fault," another voice said.

"Dalonna?"

"Yes, it's me. This is why she died in childbirth. Ollie was born wrong then too. He couldn't survive without her."

Tears slide down Kay's cheek.

"This safer way isn't the only, or best way. Or is it now?"

"It's all you, and we, have."

"Kay," Shara's voice echoed. "Someone decided a long time ago that this was best. It would remind people that souls are part of the process of birth. It would prevent the pain and physical damage caused by the birth process to mother and child. It would force the mother, or parent, to actively care for the child before birth. The soul could easily return if it chose, should she, or he, not care."

"That's not true, if he would have been broken either way."

"They forgot something," Dalonna said. "They forgot that part of the early, painful birth process, was attachment. Some can't attach without it. The numbers who cannot care for a child are growing, because those same souls keep trying, and keep failing."

"Dalonna, are you here to return us to the old ways?" Kay wasn't sure if she wanted those ways. As part of her new job, she had seen the horrid videos of childbirth women had endured. The concept of screaming for hours, or days, to bring a child into the world made her tremble.

"Yes, and no. Ollie has to live. We have to prove his defect would have occurred anyway. That he, and others can lead a happy, productive life with such injuries. We have to prove that some women can only attach to a child the old-fashioned way."

"I don't want that process. It's scary. There's no need for this much pain."

"Please. For me. You don't have to go that way. Give me a chance." Anna's soul whispered.

Kay reached out to comfort Anna. These thoughts were too much. "How did they divorce us from this anyway?"

"An extremist did it. He lost two wives to childbirth and swore it wouldn't happen to anyone again. He couldn't take the pain and anguish." Shara fluttered over Anna's head.

"Give me a choice," Anna's soul said.

"Can we keep it from going from one extreme to the other?" Kay asked.

"We have to try," Dalonna said. "We don't want to reintroduce rape and other hate crimes."

Kay shivered at the words. Did her daughter remember such an occurrence?

"Can we give Anna back the chance to carry a child?"

"It will be opening a Pandora's box." Shara said. "You don't have to worry about working, or chemicals, or eating, or anything. You watch your soul grow safe and secure in a bubble. Then the infant is born, safe and secure. Dalonna and Ollie will find a way."

"How do they keep us from having the urge, or the ability to have babies naturally?"

Shara hesitated.

She should know the answer. What hadn't they told her?

"It's part of the serum they inject into the incubator," Shara said.

"Souls not born could choose. Anna can't."

"There may be a way to reverse it. Dalonna will have to find it," Anna's soul said.

Anna's body leaned against the window, as if it were asleep. In this one room, the one place, her soul could be heard.

Tears flowed down her cheeks. "I won't be able to hear her anymore, will I?"

No one answered.

Molly's Second Chance

Jill sat on a small cushion of red velvet on the cold concrete steps. She waited for the bus to drop off her kids from their first year of school.

Across the street was an old house with large windows and heavy drapes visible through the misty panes. It appeared as if it had been well kept at one time. The home appeared to be missing something, or someone.

"I miss the warmth of summer." Something caught Jill's eye. She wasn't sure. Something peeked up over the hedge on the other side of the road. "I wish the school hadn't changed the bus drop off point."

The bus pulled up.

Jill hurried to keep up as her children ran down the block to their new home.

The next afternoon, she waited again. Jill tensed at the memory of seeing movement out of the corner of her eye the day before. This neighborhood was new to her, and she didn't know anyone. She hummed the first tune that popped into her head.

Across the street, pointy spikes peeked over the hedge several times. No sound anywhere, not even a rustling wind.

She froze into silence until the bus turned around the corner.

Wednesday, she was still scared, although a little less shy. "Come out, whoever you are." Points of sable ears triumphed over the hedge tops. There was even the hint of an onyx nose.

She almost didn't see the bus rounding the corner.

Her kids hurried home for a late dinner.

Jill lagged behind.

Curiosity overcame her fear by Thursday. She wanted to see the creature peeking at her. Jill left early with a piece of her sandwich and bravely walked over to the hedge.

Across the hedge, a tiny black dog wiggled with excitement. As tiny as the yard was; the dog was on a chain. The little dog swallowed the lunchmeat with a dainty mouth.

Jill ambled back to her usual spot. Her mind swirled.

Friday, she left home early to knock on the door and find out more about the dog. The short broken pavement walkway to the door tilted in the damp ground.

Jill peeked over the hedge.

The dog wasn't there.

She knocked on the door.

The front door creaked open.

"Yes?" An older lady in an antique dress, shaped rather like her cane, held on to the door handle.

"I want to know about the dog? Where is it today?" Jill swallowed hard.

"You are Molly's visitor. Come in, she has enjoyed seeing you every day this week. She is in the dining room."

Jill followed the older lady's tripping steps in. Book dust scent competed with the odor of draperies which appeared to have hung untouched for twenty years. The expansive formal dining room was set with expensive antique silver.

Beside a chair was a thick pillow. On it rested a tiny dog. She wore a black collar, with her name written in red. Molly woke and ran straight to Jill.

"My grandson went to college, and left her with me. He thought I would enjoy her. She has more energy than I do. I put her outside during the day. Problem is, a hedge is not a proper fence. She escapes too easily. I have to chain her. I do care for Molly. I do not have the energy she needs."

"I have two small kids, I could take her for you a few hours a day. They would enjoy playing with her. Would you allow her to go?"

The puppy wiggled and licked her face.

"No, I don't believe that would work."

Jill's heart sank. Her children would adore the dog as much as she did. Pure joy radiated from Molly's eyes.

"It is hard for me to climb up and down the stairs to let her in and out. Or, attach and detach her chain each day. I would rather you take Molly, and care for her. Bring her by for half an hour each day, and wait on the bus from here. I can see her every day. My grandson will know she is well taken care of." The lady reached gently to pat Molly's head. "Molly, will that make you happy?"

Molly looked at her. She wagged her tail, and barked one small bark.

Together, they walked out to meet the bus.

Or, Jill walked.

Molly danced.

Janie bounced off the bus. "Who's that?"

Justin pushed from behind. "Let me see!"

They both ran to little Molly and rubbed her head.

"We have to hurry home to find her a comfy bed, food, and water bowls."

Molly and the kids bounded down the street in excitement. They forgot about her. Their comments floated back in the breeze.

"Will she play ball?"

"Will she sleep with me?"

"Will she walk with us to and from the bus every day?"

Jill talked to her husband about Molly. She described the odd circumstances surrounding the dog, and her owner.

He knew more people than she did. "Old Miss Josephine who lived there for decades died a year ago. A grandson inherited the house. He hasn't been there."

Jill peered outside at Molly.

Molly played tag with the children in the yard.

Where did she really come from?

Monday Jill and Molly strolled up to the old house as promised.

The "For Sale" sign tilted in the yard. A few of the shutters hung off their hinges. Windows had been boarded shut.

She knocked.

No answer.

Jill opened the sticking unlocked door.

Dust was inches thick on the floor. Mold and mildew grew everywhere. There was no sign of footprints from her visit the previous week. The only place that wasn't dusty was a corner of the old staircase next to the dining room.

She closed the door. Jill tripped over the broken walkway with Molly at her side. The overgrown hedge blocked the yard. There was a tiny dog skeleton attached to a chain. The skeleton had a black collar. Written in red was the word "Molly."

Childhood Exploration

Sunflower

Shadows crept along the ground.

Animals jabbered and slipped into their warm dens.

Blossom curled up tight.

Aunt Luna covered Vale with her gentle light.

Vale gurgled and lapped against Terra, providing water to all in her valley.

Cousin Crystal poked and prodded at Blossom's colorful petals.

Blossom shook her petals. "Go away Crystal."

"It's my turn to play."

"Go away. You'll turn my pretty red to pale grey."

A chilly breeze whispered through the valley.

A gentle light peeked over the rim of the horizon.

Her call had awoken their mother, Eloise. "Crystal, allow Blossom to bloom again today."

"Fine. I'll go." Crystal withdrew.

Small furry creatures emerged from their homes inside of Terra's mansion. They raced across the valley, gathering dropped bits from Heather, Lilac, and Lilly that Crystal had broken off in her rough efforts to awaken them.

"Mother, save us from Crystal!"

Eloise did not speak again. Her light warmed the meadow, though not as much as it had the day before. It was a dull light, long and drawn out. Tired and ready for a nap.

The animals scampered back to their tiny homes.

"Mother, please!" Blossom and the others cried.

Eloise ignored her children's pleas.

"We have to ask Aunt Luna." Vale said. "It is getting colder. Crystal hurts me as much as you. Terra is growing firm from Crystal's games. I cannot bring water to you as easily. We must send her back to her mother."

Blossom nodded as she drifted off to sleep.

"Wake up. Blossom. Heather. Lilac. Rose. Wake up. We must all ask Aunt Luna."

"Cold." Blossom chattered and curled as tightly as she could.

"Aunt Luna, hear us." Vale's tears froze.

Aunt Luna's full figure nodded as she crossed Vale. "This is my longer season. My sister's season to rest."

Crystal ran and played, pulling on her cousins. Tearing the meadow to bits as her icy fingers froze the water. She expanded their veins more than their bodies could survive.

Aunt Luna nodded off beyond the horizon for her daily nap.

Eloise showered her rays of light across Vale.

Vale cried again at the damage Crystal had done.

Blossom was curled and brown upon the ground.

Lilac and Lilly's leaves were gone.

Rose no longer blushed a rosy red. Her leaves were splotched and curled.

"Mother. Another season gone. Another family lost."

Eloise nodded. "I know my child. I will bring forth more. It is Crystal's time to play." She disappeared behind a cloud and didn't come back out. Deep white fluffy tears filled the valley.

Vale sighed. Her friends were gone. Again. Sleep. Sleep until her mother's tears melted from the pain of Crystal's vicious games.

Her mother's tears would cover her, and increase her range and depth. Each year knowledge gained, and growing width would give rise to more young friends, some of whom, one day, would not meet Crystal's wrath.

Me-Aka

Seven girls giggled as the danced down dark, narrow wooden stairs. Open phones lighted the damp steps. Backpacks bumped into friends, nearly bowling them over. The first person to reach the bottom opened the door to the foggy street. As the girls disappeared from view, they were followed by a chorus of, "Thank you. Have a good evening!"

Emi's friends hurried toward their own homes.

Dark clouds billowed behind the home of the girl whose party she had left. She shivered.

Home will either be empty, or angry yelling. At least I was able to talk clothes and games for an hour.

Her phone vibrated. The party host texted one last message. She opened it to see the words, "careful. fun. soon."

Emi turned her phone to her favorite game.

Tires shrieked and people screamed.

A car steered right at her.

Nowhere for her to go.

She grasped her phone, and lunged for a ditch she hadn't seen before.

Pain and heat from the vehicle enveloped her body.

A fog covered everything.

A fine mist made her sneeze.

Emi stood slowly, not feeling any worse for the fall. She reached for her phone. No signal. The battery was dead. Her backpack was under her. She pulled herself out of the ditch, and plodded down the street in the direction of home.

Nobody seemed to notice her.

No one spoke to her.

People hurried right past. They seemed to walk right through her without any sensation at all.

"Someone speak."

Nobody answered. She reached out towards people, and they continued on.

"Can anyone hear me?" Emi ran and tried to grab at anyone, always out of reach.

She collapsed on a bench next to two tiny trees, barely taller than herself.

Two women on a nearby bench ignored her.

She was unable to ease the odd sensation. The fog thickened. "Am I alive?"

No one even glanced her way.

Nor, did they look purposefully away.

People hurried on down the street the same as before.

Emi watched closer.

It seemed the people moved faster than usual, and almost all in one direction.

The fog. It was never foggy here at night. Only early in the morning.

The fog was thicker behind the party house.

A tap on her shoulder, made her scream.

"Hurry, Emi, Mother is worried about you. You fell. Are you hurt bad?"

Dried blood trickled from her knees. A bump on her head from where she had landed, throbbed.

She grabbed Minoru's hand. "No one can see me, or hear me. I thought I was dead."

"Not yet, beautiful one." Her brother glanced back the way she had come. "Hurry. Me-Aka has erupted. We don't have much time."

"The ditch. It wasn't there before the party."

"The earthquake scared a lot of people."

"Did my friends escape?"

"We will find them. Hurry."

A red spot formed in the fog beyond her friend's home.

She ran after her brother.

Poetry

Meadow Race

The stable stall,
Along the main hall,
Is clean as can be,
So close to the sea,

Where the salty winds blow,
Horses stand all in a row,

Ready for the shot of the gun,
To start the racing fun,

The horse in mind,
Is well behind,

Then surges to the lead,
To beat all the others in the mead.

Summer

Burning heat,
So intense,
It fries the meat,
Hanging on the fence.

Scorching sun,
Fiery furnace flames,
Bake the land to done,
Life struggles on the plains.

Rains withheld,
Hot and dry,
Animals become scaled,
Dreaming of relief, from the sky.

Clear sky,
Open land,
No place to hide,
Life burrows in the sand.

###

Thank you for reading Concurrent Earths. I hope you enjoyed this exploration of worlds that resemble Earth, and may, or may not, have existed. If you enjoyed it, please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite online retailer and share it on social media. Choose another fiction, or nonfiction, title to explore on your journey through the myths society has encouraged us to live by.

Thanks!

Gail Brown

About the Author

Gail Brown began reading at far too young an age. Her preferred reading material was nonfiction, with biographies and science being at the forefront of her library excursions.

Her ability to memorize and use all the grammar rules in school years led to working in the school library while classmates caught up. All of those rules, and diagramming sentences was easy and relaxing. For many years. All forgotten now. Except the joyful memories of preparing the library for others to use.

Along the way, she found fiction and science fiction to help bring hope and light to a world of colorful dreams. A world where disability was accepted, people lived their lives without overwork and fear.

As an adult, gardening, and preparing the garden bounty, was her way to relax. To think. To make order out chaos.

Other Books by Gail Brown

Galataria's Echoes

Galataria survived the Devolution War generations ago. The human population saved the planet. Now they too are on the brink of extinction.

Memories of a war they have never seen cross the dimensional boundary to Kalara and Leonard.

At least, they think the dreams are nightmares of Galataria's past.

For Shalin and Jendal on Earth, the dreams are peaceful and serene. A beauty in life they have never seen.

Dreams bring a bit of both worlds across the unrecognized bridge into the other.

Galataria and Earth are threatened with ideas, and a life most don't recognize, and many fear.

Trails Series

Trails: First Generation

Pair 1, Books 1 and 2

Trails 1: Fault Lines
Trails 2: Volcano

Disaster builds on disaster.

The Earth shakes and begins the process of opening the Rio Sea, where once a great ocean thrived.

As the shaking continues, Yellowstone awakes, blanketing much of the continent with ash, and inducing a multi-year winter and famine for those who survived the quakes, volcano, and societal unrest.

The rules have changed. Competition is no longer king.

People and animals must adapt to a changed world, reliant on each other.

Trails: Pit Miners

Pair 2, Books 1 and 2
Trails 3: Tales
Time: 200 years in the future

Trails 4: Mines
Time: 210 years in the future

The middens of the ancestors slowly empty. The last few usable pieces are found.

Dangers forgotten emerge from the bottoms of the pit mines. Forgotten fears told as campfire tales.

Specters of the ancestors awaken.

The future of the Pit Miners, and the communities beyond that they barely know exist, are at risk.

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